インテリビレッジの座敷童（ざしきわらし）

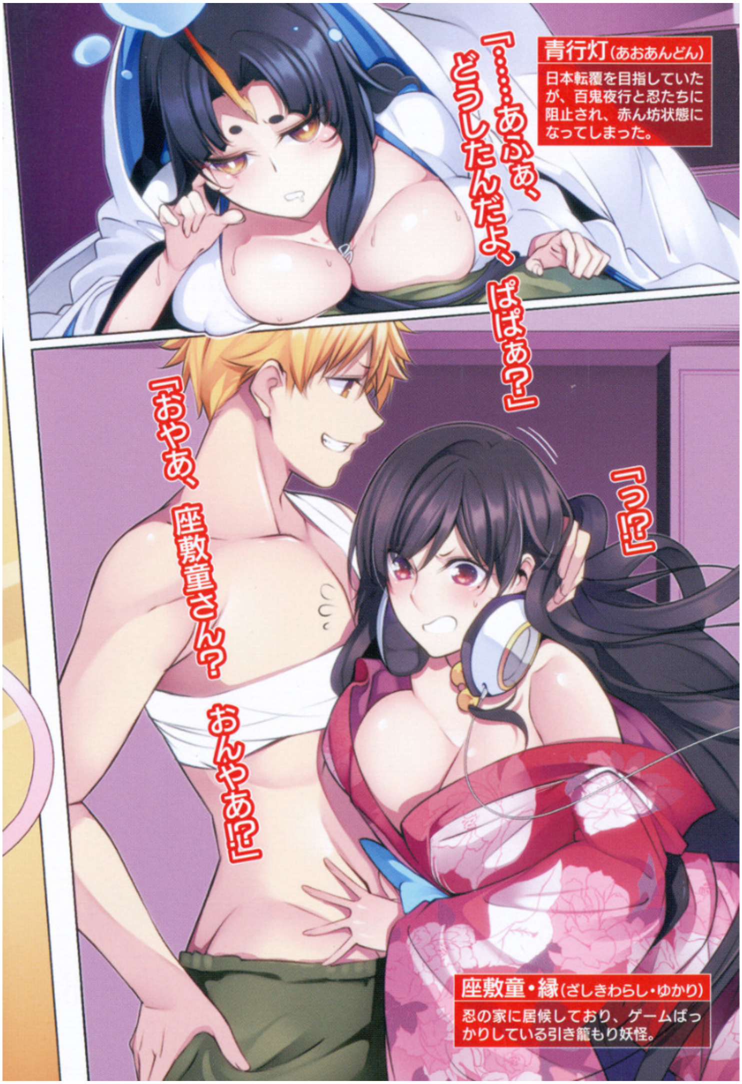
8

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

電撃文庫

「──あまり俺に迷惑を掛けてくれるなよ、雪女。な？」
「（ぱくぱく）……!!」
陣内 忍（じんない・しのぶ）
「インテリビレッジ」に住む、妖怪に好かれやすい体質の金髪高校生。
雪女（ゆきおんな）
夏が苦手な、見た目はロリ少女の致命誘発体ヤンデレ婚活妖怪。
「きゅうううん……」
インテリビレッジの
座敷童⑧
鎌池和馬 イラスト／真早

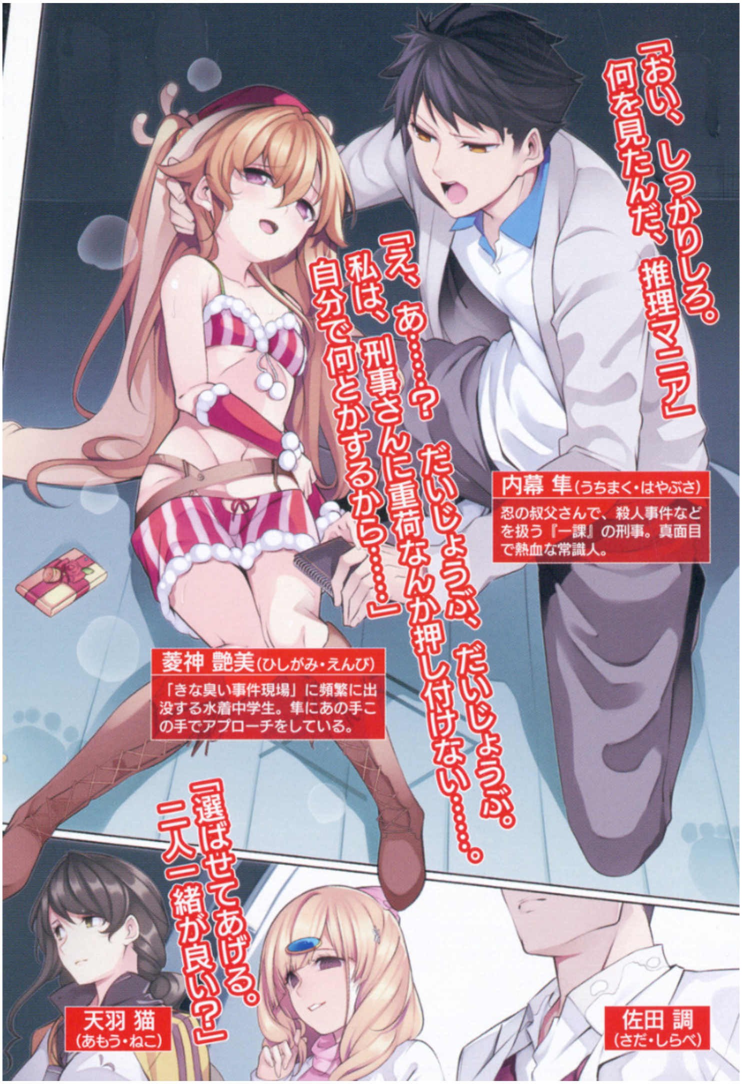

「……あふぁ、どうしたんだよ、ぱぱぁ？」
「っ!?」
「おやあ、座敷童さん？おんやあ!?」

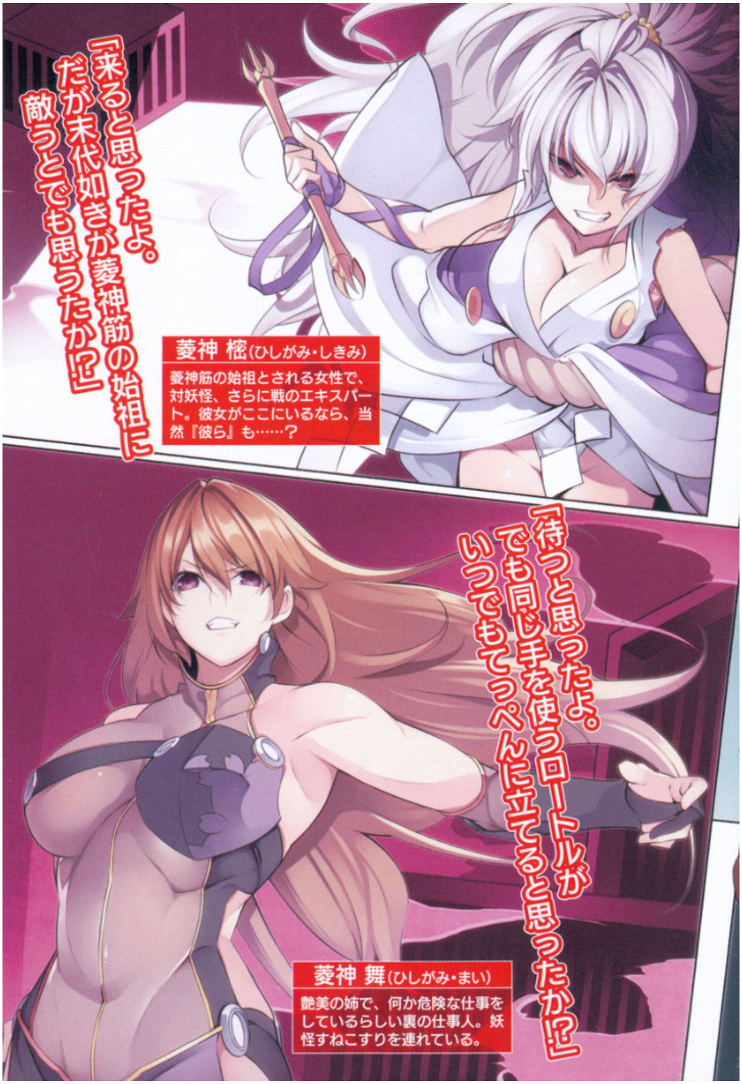
青行灯（あおあんどん）

日本転覆を目指していたが、百鬼夜行と忍たちに阻止され、赤ん坊状態になってしまった。

座敷童・縁（ざしきわらし・ゆかり）

忍の家に居候しており、ゲームばっかりしている引き籠もり妖怪。


「おい、しっかりしろ。何を見たんだ、推理マニア」
内幕 隼（うちまく・はやぶさ）
忍の叔父さんで、殺人事件などを扱う『一課』の刑事。真面目で熱血な常識人。
「え、あ……？　だいじょうぶ、だいじょうぶ。私は、刑事さんに重荷なんか押し付けない……。自分で何とかするから……」
菱神 艶美（ひしがみ・えんび）
「きな臭い事件現場」に頻繁に出没する水着中学生。隼にあの手この手でアプローチをしている。
「選ばせてあげる。二人一緒が良い？」
天羽 猫（あもう・ねこ）
佐田 調（さだ・しらべ）

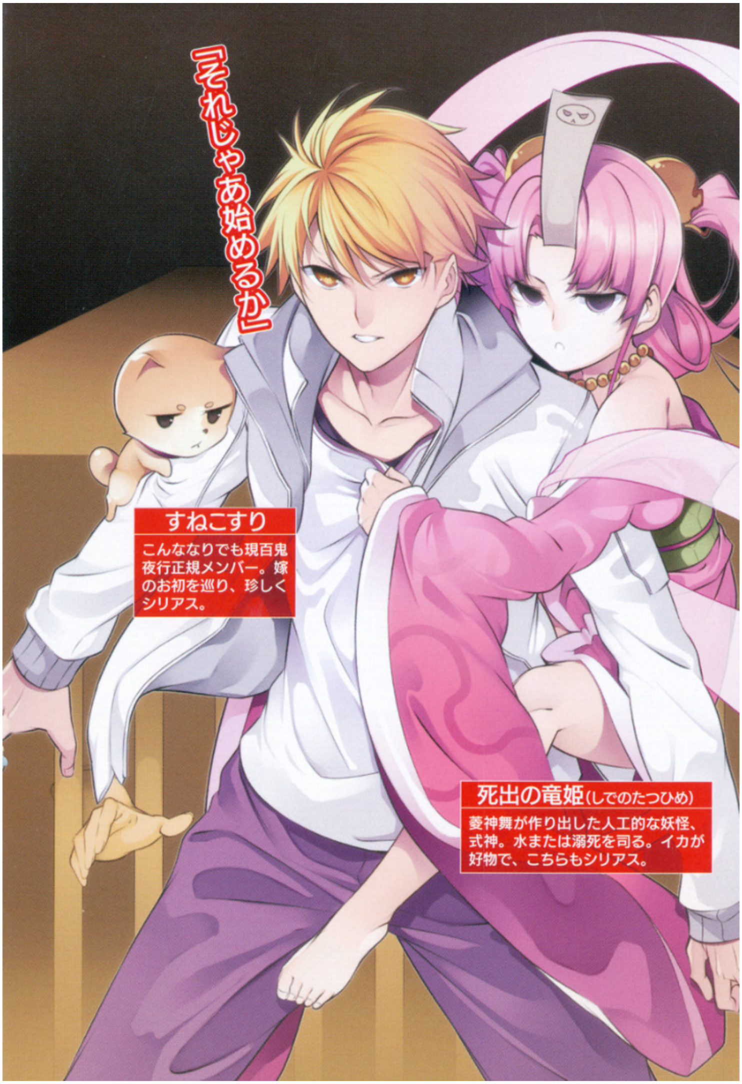

「来ると思ったよ。
だが末代如きが菱神筋の始祖に
敵うとでも思うたか⁉」
「待つと思ったよ。
でも同じ手を使うロートルが
いつでもてっぺんに立てると思ったか⁉」

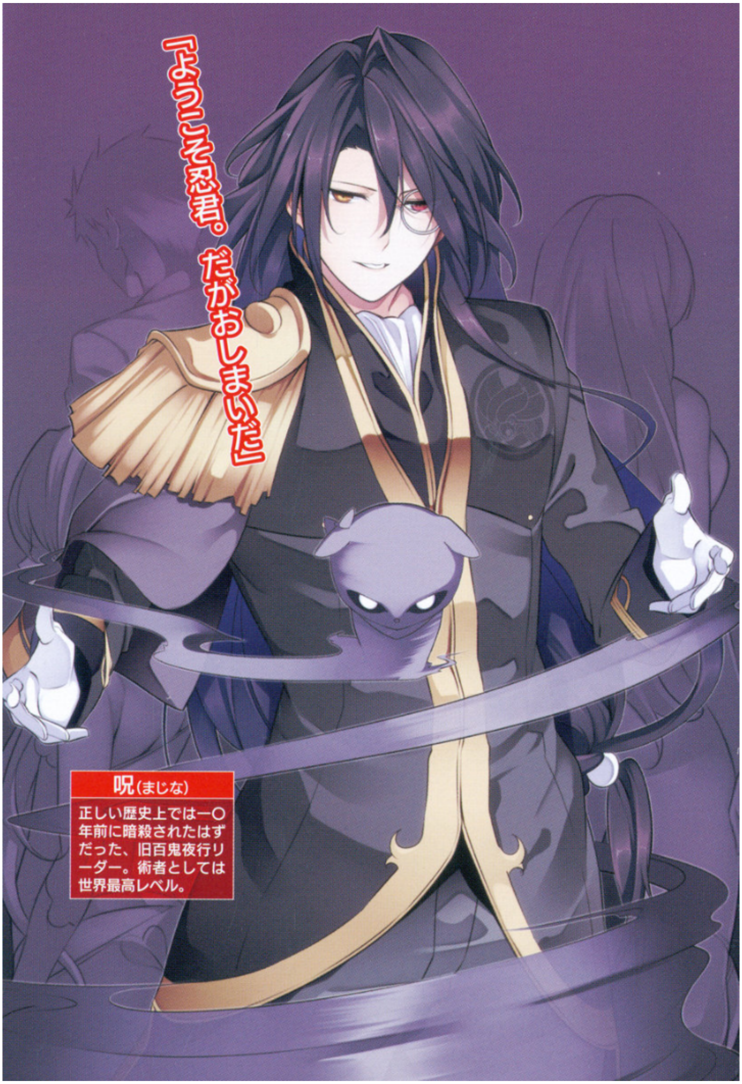
菱神 樒（ひしがみ・しきみ）

菱神筋の始祖とされる女性で、対妖怪、さらに戦のエキスパート。彼女がここにいるなら、当然『彼ら』も……？

菱神 舞（ひしがみ・まい）

艶美の姉で、何か危険な仕事をしているらしい裏の仕事人。妖怪すねこすりを連れている。


「それじゃあ始めるか」
すねこすり
こんななりでも現百鬼夜行正規メンバー。嫁のお初を巡り、珍しくシリアス。
死出の竜姫（しでのたつひめ）
菱神舞が作り出した人工的な妖怪、式神。水または溺死を司る。イカが好物で、こちらもシリアス。

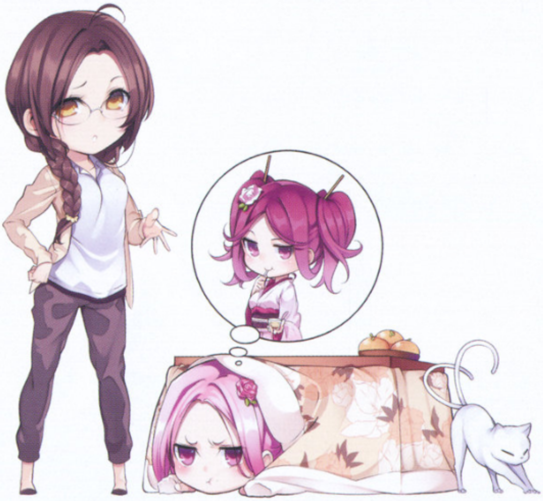

「ようこそ忍君。だがおしまいだ」

呪（まじな）

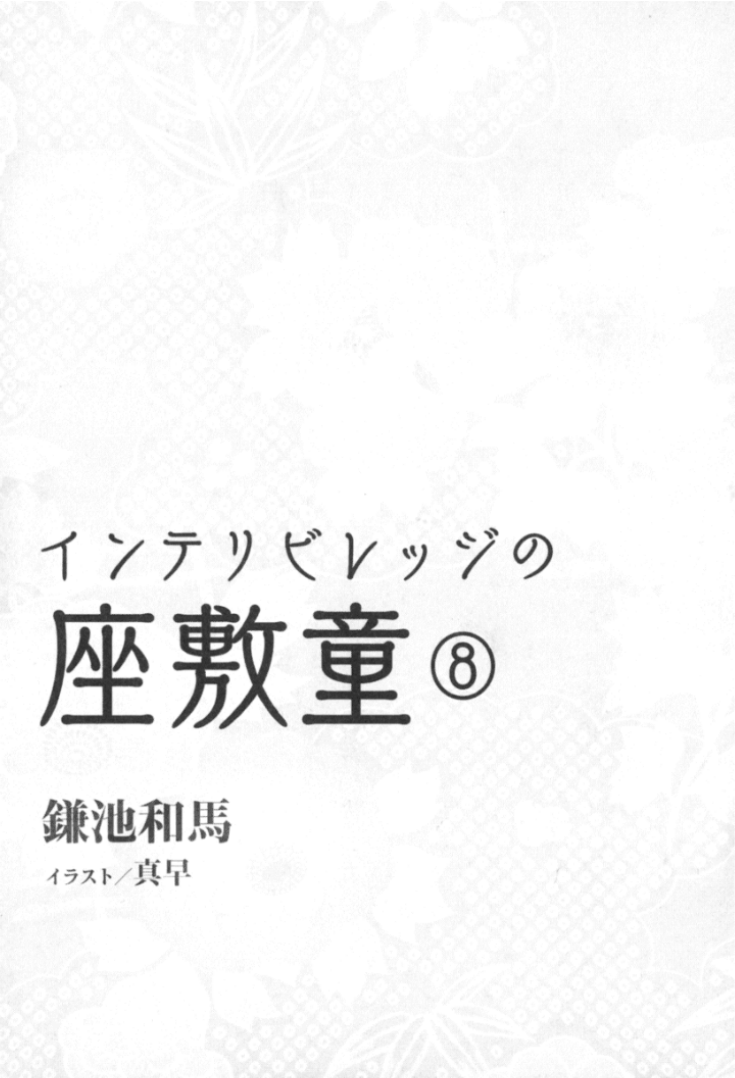
正しい歴史上では一〇年前に暗殺されたはずだった、旧百鬼夜行リーダー。術者としては世界最高レベル。

もくじ

序章 —— 010
第一章 ドキドキ渚パラダイス by 陣内忍 —— 014
第二章 座敷牢にて再び疑問を by 内幕隼 —— 116
第三章 天を仰ぎ開く奈落の口 by 菱神舞 —— 218
第四章 チヅメノザシキワラシ by ？？？ —— 274
終章 —— 380



デザイン／渡邊宏一（有限会社ニイナナニイゴオ）



インテリビレッジの
座敷童⑧

鎌池和馬

イラスト／真早

Prologue

You might be surprised to hear it, but the Zashiki Warashi cried pretty easily.

It mostly happened when her hobbies or entertainment were taken from her. For example, when the house's internet connectivity was annihilated by a router problem or when my dad got mad and locked all the video games in the storage shed out front.

However, there was one incident that had left an impression on me.

I think it was back when I was in the fourth or fifth grade of elementary school.

I got into a pretty serious argument with that Good-for-Nothing Youkai. No, thinking back on it, I may have just yelled at her without listening to anything she was trying to say.

The fight had been started by something pretty simple: when I got back from school, my toy robot's body was broken clean in half. Based on what my mom and gramma told me, it was obvious that Zashiki Warashi had knocked it from the shelf, but she refused to admit to it. I had thrown a tantrum without listening to anything that Indoor Youkai tried to say. Of course, it had only lasted half an hour at the most.

But that was when she had cried.

Yes, I'm talking about that sexy Youkai in her red yukata.

I'm talking about that "Nee-chan" who was twice my height…well, maybe not that much, but who was at least two heads taller than me.

Like a kid abandoned in an unfamiliar city, she had crumpled up her face, opened her mouth wide, rubbed the reddened corners of her eyes with the backs of her hands, and bawled. Her voice had echoed through the house to the point that a police car or fire truck siren probably would have been less of a racket.

When I saw that, I began to wonder something.

That Zashiki Warashi had been around since before I was born – in fact, probably for centuries before I was born – and yet I began to think she might not be a fully grown adult.

I began to think she wanted to grow up and be seen like an adult just like the rest of us kids.

So I decided not to make her cry like that again. There are different kinds of tears, but I didn't want to see this kind again. …Of course, it did turn out that Good-for-Nothing Youkai was indeed the culprit behind the broken toy robot, but that's a different issue altogether.

"Ahh…"

I sat on the ground, leaned my back against the wall, and slowly exhaled.

I looked up toward the heavens.

I couldn't help but smile when I saw the heavy-looking clouds dropping fluffy snow.

Why had that come back to me?

But remembering things like that wasn't so bad from time to time.

When I filled my lungs with air, I detected the strong, festering scent of rusty iron. An awful stench resembling roasted bile was mixed in. I never wanted to look back down again. I was surrounded in every direction by a scene of hell, so there was no mental respite no matter where I looked. The walls and ground were splattered with hopeless colors of red, black, and purple. Thanks to that, I didn't have anything left in my stomach to vomit up.

So give me just a bit of this.

Let me indulge in my memories just a little as a reward for living long enough to reach this moment.

*Hey, ******.*

…Really. How did the world grow so red?

Chapter 1: Heart-Pounding Nagisa Paradise by Jinnai Shinobu

Part 1

It was November.

The weekend had finally come, but I couldn't sleep in until noon today.

"Nnn…"

Something seemed intensely off in my futon.

I felt a smooth, squirming sensation of skin. I detected a slightly sweet aroma resembling old incense more than the chemical floral smells of the shampoos and conditioners my classmates used. As soon as I felt someone else's body heat below the blanket, my sleepy mind rapidly focused itself as I lay on my side.

"Wait! Not again, you Good-for-Nothing Zashiki Warashi! Why do you have to sneak into people's futons!?"

I mean, I would love to grope her tits if I could and I'd bow down to get a chance to see her naked, but there was more to it than that! I needed to prepare myself mentally!! This kind of surprise attack was bad for my heart!!

I felt blood instantly gathering in my head and that surge of heat moved my hand below the blanket. I was blindly searching for her slender shoulder to throw her out, but…

"Ow! What the hell!?"

I felt a sharp pain like I had touched the point of a giant pair of sewing scissors, so I quickly pulled my hand back.

Then a chill ran down my spine.

Eh? What? Scissors? In other words…a blade? She's definitely never brought something like that into the futon before. No…no, wait. Is this really that Zashiki Warashi? When it comes to blades, I can't help but think of that member of the world's top three yandere! Don't tell me this is that crazed childhood friend Nagisa-chan!! Please, please don't tell me she's had a relapse!

"Wait, wait. If *the* Nagisa is within twenty centimeters of me, I'm dead three times over!”

I frantically pulled back the blanket. It felt like belatedly realizing I’d gone to sleep holding a hornet’s nest in my arms.

But I was wrong.

Someone had been nestled up against me with their head right next to my chest, but it wasn’t that Indoor Youkai in the red yukata or the childhood friend from hell who was rumored to know 34,000 methods of killing.

“Ah.”

“Nnn… Mumble, mumble… Fwah, what is it, papa?”

“Aoandon!?”

The girl wore a white kimono and had a single knife-like horn splitting through her glossy black hair as it grew from her forehead. She looked like a lovely and pure girl (but with a decent chest), but she was actually an artificial Youkai created by absorbing one hundred ghost stories. She was also a literal evil Oni who had plotted to overthrow Japan and had nearly destroyed Hyakki Yakou, the most powerful occult organization.

This made me realize the sweet aroma was not the Good-for-Nothing Youkai’s scent and my body heat only shifted up a gear. I wasn’t able to cool down through my usual routine!

“What are you doing!? Why are you here!?”

“Well, I am a collection of the questions and answers of a few people, including you. That makes us something like father and daughter. It would be too boring to just call us creator and creation, don’t you think? So what’s this? Are you saying a baby of only a few months isn’t allowed to sleep in her parent’s arms?”

Ugh…

It was true her motivation had mostly been that of a monster baby that wanted to speak of the world without knowing the first thing about the world and wanted to answer people’s cries without knowing the first thing about people. And we did carry some responsibility for creating her and then abandoning her in the world at large.

The Aoandon giggled while curled up on the futon with a body far too developed for a high school boy to be calling his daughter.

"I know exactly what I can say to keep you from pushing me away."

"What?"

"I can't directly cause any destruction due to the mental stopper inside me. Just like you would feel illogical hesitation toward crushing a spoiled kitten below your foot. But I can use my power indirectly. For example, if I were to arrange it in the form of an unforeseen accident."

She traced her slender index finger along my chest more like a lover than a daughter.

Wait. What is this rusty iron smell I hadn't noticed before?

"I really couldn't help it☆ I have this knife-like horn on my head after all. When I rubbed up against you like a loving child, it happened to tear your chest to shreds, but that was a complete accident. I didn't mean anything by it."

"Waaahh!!"

I screamed when I looked down.

Wh-what is this? I'm bleeding way more than that shaving disaster when I tried to act cool using that large razor one-handed!

The Aoandon laughed at my panic.

She's hopeless. She might not be able to crush a kitten underfoot anymore, but that doesn't mean we've mended our differences. She's just hiding her cruelty! It didn't go away!!

Frightened by this legit deadly Youkai, I tried to move away, but I ran into someone lying on my other side.

Is it the Zashiki Warashi this time!?

However, the skin felt like dried branches and I detected a faint aged smell.

No, wait. Don't tell me… Wait!!

The newcomer then spoke behind me.

“Mumble, mumble… Nnn…boy…”

“Noooo!! I don’t want you showing up as the punch line, old man!!!!!”

On one side was the symbol of the calamity that arrived at the end of the Hyakumonogatari. On the other was the Aburatori, a symbol of untraditional fear who was even worse than the Aoandon when it came to his specialty of killing children.

As usual, the Intellectual Village was in top form first thing in the morning.

Part 2

…*Ow, ow.*

The Aoandon had really done a number on me that morning.

My chest was a bit bloody, but it wasn’t as bad as it looked. It would probably be fine without any kind of treatment, so I dragged my stinging body to the changing room/washroom to wash my face.

I started by scooping up cold water in my hands and slapping my cheeks. Then I mixed in some hot water for warm water, lathered up some face cream, and rubbed it into my face with circular motions. While it was refreshing, it stung my eyelids. It may not have been a good match for my skin, but I at least had to use up the tube.

After washing off the foam with the warm water, I looked up to see the Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata reflected in the mirror.

She was holding a first aid kit.

“Hm? What is it, Good-for-Nothing Youkai?”

“That’s my line.”

She sounded exasperated as she set the first aid kit down on the washing machine and opened it.

“Where did you get those cuts this early in the morning? Anyway, let me see them. You can’t just ignore them.”

O-okay.

I ended up letting her do as she wished. It may have looked bad, but it was really only a thin layer of skin that was cut. It was no more than a cut from a razor when shaving, so I’d been planning to ignore it. Was this a case where the blood concerned the others more than the injured person?

“Hmm.”

The Zashiki Warashi reached a slender finger toward my chest.

Inside the pajama top torn apart by the Aoandon, she traced her finger along my unharmed skin to wipe away the blood that had seeped down.

“It isn’t very deep. Some disinfectant and a bandage should be enough.”

“Hey, Indoor Youkai, this is kind of embarrassing.”

“Quiet. I need to take off your shirt to wrap a bandage around you, so raise your hands. C’mon, up with those hands.”

She was acting like she was helping a little kid change clothes.

The disinfectant stung a little, but I personally found the bandage more difficult. Specifically, it tickled! It felt like having a cheap fluffy sweater rubbing directly against my chest!! It wasn’t just bittersweet!!

After wrapping the bandage around my chest, the Zashiki Warashi fixed the end of the bandage in place with a small metal clip.

“There. All done.”

“You suddenly start acting like a big sister sometimes, you know that?”

My casual comment elicited a twitch from the shoulders in front of me.

…Oh?

“What’s this? Do you not like being called ‘indoor’ or ‘good-for-nothing’? Would you prefer I called you ‘Nee-chan’? How was I supposed to know if you never told me?”

“I-I have no idea what you’re talking about…”

“It doesn’t matter to me what I call you. Peh heh heh. Nee-chaaan.”

I never would have done this a month before, but I had worked out some things during the Aoandon incident. The trip to ten years in the past probably played the biggest role. The unpleasant reluctance toward this kind of thing had vanished.

The Zashiki Warashi was frozen in place close enough to feel her warm breath on my chest wound and her black-haired head was trembling a little.

“I-I can’t stand this! I know you’ve been horribly tainted since back then, but I can’t deny that hearing you call me Nee-chan is shaking my heart!!”

“Don’t act so innocent after manipulating me into doing things for you so often. And while I’m fine calling you Nee-chan, don’t start thinking you’re my superior or anything.”

“What?”

“There! Right there!! That rising tone at the end there!! You’re definitely looking down on me!! But I know I outrank you when it comes to human things like education, athletics, and sociability!”

“Shinobu.” She shook her head in utter exasperation. “I know the perfect way to see just who is superior to whom. Try patting my head and calling me a good girl.”

“…”

Pat, pat.

Good girl, good girl.

“…Huh? What’s going on? I feel faint…and a little ill…”

“See? It’s hopelessly out of place, isn’t it? This proves I’m your superior. Your very soul is rejecting the idea of looking down on me.”

Nhh!

I wasn’t going to let her get the last laugh here. I would never let her quit while she was ahead(?). I would at least end this in a draw(???)!!

“Shinobu, how long do you plan to keep rubbing my hea-…kyah!?”

I slid my palm down her silky hair, moving it from the top of her head to the back. I then pulled forward to hold her head in my arm, placing her forehead right on my bandaged chest.

Her palms were still placed gently on my chest and she seemed oddly silent.

I pressed my nose against the top of her head.

Oh? This Good-for-Nothing Youkai smells pretty good.

“I think I like this better than rubbing your head. Hmm, but it’s not as fun since it puts us on equal footing.”

“……………………………………………………………………………………

“Hm? Zashiki Warashi-san? Onyah!?”

“!?”

She must not have liked that I had noticed how she briefly froze up because her shoulders gave a large start.

When she looked up at me from my arms, I played dumb.

“What’s the matter, young lady? Having trouble hiding your surprise at how manly you’re finding the boy you’ve always treated like a little brother?”

“Wh-where did this dark-hearted Shinobu come from!? Where did I go wrong raising you!?”

Probably the part where you bathed with me and slept next to me every night. It turned me into something of a gourmet.

Also, mwa ha ha!! I have no idea where the line between winner and loser is anymore, but I’m definitely on top here! I’m king of the hill!! Or at least, you don’t get to quit while you’re ahead this time!!

But…

“…No fair.”

I heard a quiet voice that sounded like an icy wind blowing in from the depths of hell.

I looked over to find the Yuki Onna poking half her head out from the changing room door and glaring at me in yandere mode.

“What’s so great about treating wounds? I can do that too. Did you know flash freezing can stop bleeding, prevent cell death, and cut off the pain signals in the nerves? In other words, I can do it better. Now, let’s try it out. Come over here and pat my head too.”

“Wait! That method sounds like it would destroy the cells in the freezing/thawing process and it’s probably a really bad idea right on top of the heart like this. I’m pretty sure I’ll die!! And when did that Zashiki Warashi escape my arm!? Wait! Don’t leave me behind, *Nee-chaaaan*!!”

After that last word, the sexy Youkai’s shoulders twitched and she sighed.

She was already well on her way toward slipping out the changing room’s small window, but she made a change of plans and clung to my back for some reason.

It was like a Nininbaori or ventriloquism show. I felt something soft squishing against my back, but it didn’t seem the best time to make a joke.

She then whispered in my ear as quietly as she could manage.

“First, grab the Yuki Onna’s slender shoulders in your hands and move her to the wall.”

“?”

I ended up doing as I was told.

“Eh heh heh. I can easily freeze the injury with temperatures of eighty below ze-…hyahn!?”

“Place your hand on the wall next to her head. Now look her in the eye as if leaning over her. Make your presence known and don’t take no for an answer!”

“Wha-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wha-wh-wh-wh-wha-…”

“Use your other hand to gently grab her chin between your thumb and forefinger. Yes, and pull it up!”

“…!!”

“Finish it off by pressing your forehead against hers!”

“…!!!???”

“Finally, whisper this…”

“…Don’t cause me too much trouble, Yuki Onna. Got that?”

“K-…”

The Yuki Onna’s eyes were spinning and her entire body looked red.

“Kyuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuun…”

She slid down as if her hips had given out. She seemed to have passed out and her flat-chested body had melted a fair bit.

Wait. Eh?

What did I just do???

“What was that!? I’m disgusted with myself! I want to be the comedian type of popular, so this isn’t who I am! Was that the Wall-Don, Floor-don, Ceiling-Don, or whatever it’s called from shoujo manga!? That cliché would never work in real life! So it’s even more baffling that it just worked here!”

“Heh. Clichés can be powerful if you stick with them and don’t chicken out. They’re clichés for a reason, after all. It’s just that going for it without slamming on the brakes is incredibly hard.”

The Zashiki Warashi poked her head out from behind me with a triumphant look on her face.

Hmm. How should I put this?

“So is that your fantasy? Don’t tell me this all-out perfect older sister type writhes around in the bath imagining she’s a perfectly-proportioned starry-eyed shoujo manga girl with tons of eyelashes.”

“Bfh!? L-let’s not start making ridiculous accusations, Shinobu!!”

Part 3

The thatch-roof house had grown quite lively.

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata had always lived there, but quite a few newcomers had been added: the flat Yuki Onna, the Nekomata who had wandered on in, the Western Succubus, the Furutsubaki (Small) who had been brought here during the Australia incident, the Aoandon from Zenmetsu Village, the deadly Aburatori who had been transformed into a Kaeshigami, and Marguerite Steinhols, the witch whose soul had been imprisoned by Archdemon Tselika.

My Youkai-loving mom had added even more with an Azukiarai, a Keseran-Pasaran, and the Furutsubaki (Large), so there were quite a few of them.

That could of course be a problem, so…

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi.”

“What is it?”

“And the rest of you too. Over here, everyone!”

After eating breakfast, I gathered the house’s problem children in the Buddhist altar room. A human like Marguerite was casually mixed into this occult category, but…

Wait. Is that okay? Her visa has to have expired, so wouldn’t she count as an illegal alien?

I prayed that the great Hyakki Yakou had done something about that and then got down to business.

“You all know about my uncle, right? His name is Uchimaku Hayabusa and he works in Tokyo as a police detective.”

“Oh, the one who left this peaceful rural village to risk his life in the big city because he wanted to meet some youthful middle school girls? That kind of aggressive approach isn’t bad.”

I noticed one hell of a misunderstanding in there, but we would be here all day if I bothered correcting every little thing.

“He called to say he’s coming here for a job today or tomorrow and he wants to stay here instead of at an inn. However, Youkai really seem to dislike him and I don’t think he knows the house he grew up in is full of deadly Youkai. …I know different Youkai have different traits and traditions, but don’t kill my uncle. Can you promise me that?”

The Furutsubaki duo both nodded, but they accepted so readily I had trouble believing them. I decided to hammer this one home.

“Repeat after me! I will not attack Shinobu’s uncle.”

“I will not attack Shinobu’s uncle.”

“I will not attack Shinobu’s uncle.”

“I will not attack Shinobu’s uncle.”

“Good! Now, I will not eat Shinobu’s uncle.”

“I will not eat Shinobu’s uncle… Sigh.”

“I will not eat Shinobu’s uncle… Sigh.”

“I will not eat Shinobu’s uncle… Sigh.”

“I’m a little worried by that disappointed sigh, but this should just about-…hey, Zashiki Warashi! Why are you already putting together a rubber gun out of chopsticks and a rubber band!? And isn’t that the one I designed that has enough force to crush a kiwi!? Didn’t we swear to seal that one away forever!?”

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata remained seated in a beautiful Japanese *seiza* position, placed a hand on her cheek, and elegantly tilted her head.

“Yes, I wonder why. I have no real interest in Hayabusa’s visit, but I still feel an urge inside me to prepare for an attack.”

“Now I’m worried!!”

“If you’re done, I’ll be at the kotatsu.” (Nekomata)

“It’s November. That’s winter. That’s my season!! Pant, pant. I sense a first snow coming earlier than usual. Shiver. Please come trample all over my virgin snow!!!!!!” (Yuki Onna)

"Ahh, my shoulders are stiff now. Okay, Marguerite, let's head back into the attic to continue our secret ritual. Mwa ha ha. Yes, a ritual between witch and demon that needs to be kept hidden!!" (Succubus)

Marguerite had tried to get the Nekomata to chase a yukata sash, but gave up and made it into a corset. She and the others scattered in every direction, but I was afraid letting this slide would create some great turning point in my uncle's life.

But unfortunately, I already had plans.

"Oh, honestly! Aburatori, you take care of the rest. Don't let them gang up on my uncle. You have the power of a weaker god, so you can restrain them, right!?"

"I'm the guardian deity of children, you know?"

"Don't look so puzzled, old man! You don't even need any tricky logic! My uncle was a kid once! Isn't that enough!?"

Everyone was moving noisily around, but I had to prepare to leave.

An Intellectual Village was a high-tech rural area intentionally setup to create ultra-high quality brand-name crops, but that could sometimes be inconvenient. For example, shopping was entirely reliant on the internet and the train only ran five times a day.

Heading to the next town over to go shopping was a major event. In all seriousness, missing the train would throw off all of your plans for the day. It was a little bit cold even for November, so I put a white jacket on over my shirt.

"I'll be going now. …Dammit. How many times have I had to get a new cellphone this year alone?"

"Yes, and to think the ugly model you and probably no else uses would have trouble with the battery overheating. Hee hee."

"I don't know how many times I've had to ask this question this year alone, but are you really a Zashiki Warashi?"

Part 4

Noukotsu Village was surrounded by mountains on all sides, but there was another town past those mountains. I believe it was called Bozen City. I normally thought of it as a delivery base for online shopping, but it was fairly well developed and quite convenient if you ignored the infrequency of the trains. Of course, it was located at the base of a mountain, so it felt more cramped than a large city built on a plain or next to a bay. Still, it felt enough like a city to someone who had grown up in a rural village.

I walked past a sign saying not to smoke on the streets.

The Intellectual Village had a something of a village society going on, while rumors were only temporary… Okay, okay. I'll admit it. It wasn't easy to have a love life when a single mistake could lead to rumors spreading throughout the entire village! And the timing just wasn't right for a school romance! So until the heat died down, trying to hit on some girls in this city seemed like the better bet!! Trading in this recalled phone was my main reason to be here, but they tended to hire good-looking girls at those shops!!

But as if to drive a wedge into my plans, a damp voice reached me from directly behind.

"Eh heh heh. What are you doing here, Shinobu-chan? Are you lost?"

"…!!!???"

What I heard was enough for me to have trouble breathing. I turned around with my mouth flapping like a goldfish's.

Soft, fluffy chestnut hair, slender shoulders, and white skin. The chest was a bit of a disappointment, but I couldn't get enough of the line from her long, soft legs to her butt. She excelled at housework, she was smart, and most importantly, she was devoted to her man! …But it was all ruined by the heavy look in her eyes. Now, who did I just describe?

"N-N-N-N-N-N-N-Nagisa-san!?"

"Good morning, Shinobu-chan. It's getting chilly these days, but you didn't catch cold, did you? How about I heat up your hands with my breath?”

Nagisa smiled at me with eyes that looked even heavier than the leaden skies which seemed on the verge of snow. Instead of her school uniform, she was wearing a white cardigan over a knit dress. She wore the kind of hat that had to be pinned to the head. The cat knee socks were transparent like stockings and she had a cat tail accessory clipped to the back of her waist. Altogether, it was a kitty nurse outfit! But the Shinobu Gauge hidden in my chest didn’t react at all to her coquettish look. I’d heard that a guy’s meter was given a full boost from his survival instincts in extreme situations, but did this mean that was an old wives tale?

Still, this was odd.

It was the weekend, but romance-obsessed Nagisa-chan wasn’t with her boyfriend Akechi-kun. Even if they hadn’t made any plans, I would have expected her to spend all day hiding below her boyfriend’s floor or inside his wall.

I felt like a small doubt was leading to a horrific answer. It felt like the world I knew could be turned on its head.

I was afraid to learn the answer, but I would only be crushed by doubt if I didn’t know.

I hesitantly asked.

“U-um, Nagisa-san? Are you meeting Akechi somewhere?”

She did not hesitate to answer me with a smile.

“*We broke up.*”

………
Oh.

“Vaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

“Wait, Shinobu-chan… Why are you tearfully running off in a random direction? Eh heh heh. Are you playing hard to get?”

My thoughts had just about blanked out completely, so the next thing I knew, Nagisa held my wrist in a vise-like grip.

But of course, this was no time to be grimacing in pain.

After all… After all, after all, after all!!

I hadn't known she had broken up with Akechi. That meant one of the world's three greatest yandere *was free*. I hadn't known that. This was very, very, very bad. She placed all seven billion people on this planet into one of four categories: Enemy, ally, not interested, and extreme love. I'd managed to get by until now with Akechi filling the "extreme love" slot, but if she was free and that slot was open, then any guy standing in front of her could end up filling it. While it was true she was a yandere, she was most dangerous when she was free. It was like super-sweet game of deadly musical chairs with an anti-tank mine in place of a cushion and I may have just sat right on top of that mine!!

"Shinobu-chan…"

She narrowed her eyes and slowly, slowly spoke to me with a sugary voice that sounded like a bottomless bog of sugar, honey, and cream.

There was a…what was that thing? Oh, right. There was a paraglider circling overhead, but it looked like a vulture circling a likely target to me.

"After we broke up, I dated a lot of different people, but not many of them lasted even a month. None of them could compare to my first love… So I've been thinking about some things."

“It’s not good to get too fixated on one thing and think about it over and over! It’ll trigger Gestaltzerfall!!”

“I think I might have been chasing after your shadow in everyone I’ve dated since…”

“You’re imagining it!! In fact, you’ll say that to anyone, won’t you!? You’ll say all of your past mistakes were necessary to meet them! Just to be clear, you can’t erase your dating history by making up some grand ‘reason’ for it all!! You can’t force it all into a straight path to pretend that every single one is your first love!!”

“Eh heh heh. Hey, Shinobu-chan. Do you believe in the red string of fate? I think there really might be something that connects people who are meant to be together☆”

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh!! She’s not listening to anything I say! She’s locked onto me already!! M-m-m-m-m-m-m-my teeth are chattering!

“B-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-b-but what happened with Akechi? What went wrong!?”

“I don’t know, I don’t care, and *I don’t see why I should even bother remembering what someone I don’t love looked like.*”

Oh, no.

I suddenly pictured him chopped to pieces with a machete and boiled away in a metal drum. I couldn’t rule that out. I couldn’t rule out anything anymore! He could easily have been turned into something like a thick beef stew cooked for seven long hours by a French chef!!

I could only pray to the god in heaven and to athletic Akechi-kun’s escape skills.

I made it out alive in the past, so surely you can too, Akechi!

“But…but what happened!? The two of you were always so lovey-dovey and flirting!”

“…Do you really want to know?”

Her heavy eyes were accompanied by a thin smile on her lips.

“He was so cruel. I don’t remember what he looked like or which number boyfriend he was, but he was cruel. His handkerchief stunk, he got bed hair, he was sweaty, I made it very clear I’m on the left when we hold hands and he still got it wrong three times, he was more than 120 seconds late meeting me on five separate occasions, miso soup has to be made with a dried sardine stock yet I was forced to eat mud made from dried bonito and kombu and pretend I liked it, it took him more than a minute to return my emails when I only sent him 97 in a day and worked so, so hard to not send more than 100 in a day, and so on and so on.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Nagisa’s yandere illusion seemed to be wearing down my soul, so I cut her off with a scream.

You haven’t changed at all since back then! You’re as crazy as ever, Nagisa-chaaaaaan!!

Meanwhile, her eyes seemed to be spinning as she lost herself in those crazy memories.

“Sob, sob. Hey, Shinobu-chan. Where are you going today?”

“W-well. Ah ha ha ha ha. I have a lot of shopping to do and it’s going to take a *real* long time, so you should probably stick to your original plans.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll stick with you. Forever.”

Ah.

I recognized this situation. If I pressed the issue, she would adorably whisper into my ear: “Why won’t you listen to me? Maybe there’s something wrong with your ears. Not to worry, Shinobu-chan. I’ll clean them out. C’mon, lie down in my lap☆” Then she would ever-so-thoroughly clean out my ears down to the eardrum.

“…Shinobu-chan.”

She grabbed my hand, intertwined our fingers, embraced my arm, and leaned against me from the side. I sensed a gentle feminine scent, warmth, and softness. I could feel the warmth of her breath and the silkiness of her hair. But this was all her version of the pay-on-delivery scam. It was like finding an edible bird’s nest or shark fin on your front step and then being forced to pay the exorbitant price after the fact!

The old man smoking on a no-smoking bench and the kid going over to scold the man for smoking did not realize at all what an emergency this was. I was literally in a fight for my life here! This was the problem with beautiful girls. They just had to smile and everyone took their side!!

“*Where are you going today?*”

“The…”

Was I crying? Or had the dial spun all the way around to smiling?

I wasn’t sure as I forced out the words like squeezing out fresh cream.

“The cellphone…store.”

Part 5

The cellphone store took up the first floor of a multi-tenant building a bit away from the train station but still on the main road. The bright store was covered in windows and it looked more like a post office or bank lobby than an electronics store. However, the blinds were lowered, so I couldn't see anything outside. There were a lot of sofas, but that must have been because the different processes left people with a lot of time to wait around. Perhaps to advertise the carrier, a large e-book reader was prepared in the magazine stand and the TV was playing a zombie movie streaming from the internet.

As I glanced through the new model pamphlets installed on the e-book reader, Nagisa spoke with her shoulder pressed up against mine.

"Look, Shinobu-chan. It's a Kasha-chan strap."

"What? Kasha???"

"It's a collaboration with a local mascot. Oh, yeah. The winter festival is coming up soon, isn't it? I hope we can go together this year☆"

The flat-screen was introducing a strap modeled after a black cat walking on two legs as it pulled an oxcart from the Heian period.

Hmm. What kind of Youkai was the Kasha again?

"#7: Nakisuna Okuri. I repeat, #7: Nakisuna Okuri. We are ready to serve you now, so please come to the counter."

"Oh, it's finally my turn. That's me, that's me."

A young man with a beard stood up from the sofa. His bright orange down jacket and jeans were fine, but the knit cap and sunglasses made me wonder if someone would mistake him for a robber. It was a no-smoking lobby, but he pressed a cigarette butt into a portable ashtray modeled after that same Kasha-chan. The number was pretty low even taking into account that the store hadn't been open long. Not many people were waiting, so it probably wouldn't be long until my turn. Not that I could call this "clear sailing" when Nagisa was free and hanging around me!

"#8: Jinnai Shinobu. I repeat, #8: Jinnai Shinobu. We are ready to serve you now, so please come to the counter."

"Eh heh heh. Good luck, Shinobu-chan."

With that meaningless encouragement pushing me onward, I walked up to the horizontal line of counters.

Standing on the other side was what I guessed was a part-timer. The short girl had short hair with her bangs held in place by a hairpin. She wore a suit-like light green jacket and tight skirt with the carrier's name printed in large letters like on a race queen. She wore the store's uniform perfectly, but she also would have looked at home in my school's hallways if she changed into a school uniform. Still, she would probably have fallen into the "upperclassman" category.

The nametag on her modest chest said she was Nozaki Haru.

"Um, what do you need?"

"Well, I don't know all the details, but…y'know, there was an article on your website and they were talking about it on the news. The D512's battery can overheat, right? Well, I happen to have that exact model."

When I pulled my phone from my pocket and placed it on the counter, Nozaki-san began waving her hands back and forth. She seemed to have been given a script to follow, but she was having trouble remembering it.

Hmm. So she's the small animal type.

Then an icy voice reached me from behind.

"Shinobu-chan…?"

O-oh, no! My careless adoration of this girl from a more heartwarming world has triggered Nagisa's sensors! This employee is going to end up buried in the mountains!!

Nozaki-san apparently had poor danger senses despite being so nervous, so she didn't notice Nagisa.

"Um, um, thank you very much. No, I mean… Understood! Now, will a replacement battery suffice?"

“What? I thought the website said you would give me a different model of similar specs free of charge.”

“Well, um, uh, we’ve changed our policy…no, I mean… We have updated our means of support for this issue. We have discovered we can provide support without replacing the entire phone. Transferring the data takes time, so this is less of a hassle for you, the customer.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter to me,” I said without really thinking about it. “Oh, but will the new battery already be charged? Or do I need to charge it up once I get home?”

“What!? Um, um… E-excuse me! Can you wait just a moment!?”

“Eh? Well, if you don’t know, that’s fine too.”

“K-Kamimaki-san! Excuse me, but about this customer’s question!!”

Nozaki-san almost tearfully went to get some help from a male employee moving back and forth behind the counter.

D-does she just have a really strong sense of responsibility? I can’t get enough of watching her, but…yeah. I should keep that a secret.

This Kamimaki-san appeared to be college aged. His black hair was parted down the middle and he looked like a refreshing sort of person. I had to wonder if they hired these workers based on their looks. The male uniform didn’t seem all that great, though.

“Nozaki-san, you shouldn’t get so nervous in front of a customer. What they want from us is a sense of reassurance. While it isn’t an actual product, it’s still something we have to provide them. Okay?”

“O-okay. But about what this customer needs…”

I felt someone looking over from the next booth.

However, they weren’t looking at me. A sexier female employee was dealing with the neighboring customer. When she looked over, her body stiffened and her hands wandered through the air. It was inappropriate, but it was kind of cute seeing the older girl with thick lipstick looking so troubled.

“Hey, Kamimaki-san… Oh, geez. Not again.”

Was she having some trouble too? Being their advisor must have been tough.

However, the customer was not necessarily going to wait around. The guy in a knit cap and sunglasses leaned forward with his elbow on the counter.

“C’mon, you don’t have to get so irritated. If you’ve got to wait, then how about we have a quick chat, Akehara-chaaan? Is that earring a Near Elf? Do you tend to hang around the areas north of here?”

The employee’s earring covered more than just the earlobe. An extremely detailed metalwork “side” seemed to sharpen the overall silhouette of her ear. The bearded man grinned and toyed with it.

It looked like he was here for the employees too. But since he was showing off a complaint card while asking her private questions about her life, I had to wonder if he actually thought that was going to win her over.

The young woman’s long chestnut hair was tied back and her forced smile was a little stiff, but based on the timing, it may have had more to do with the cigarette smell coming from that Nakisuna guy’s mouth and down jacket. I’d heard that people sensitive to that kind of thing were really sensitive to it.

Things were strained between the employees and muddy between the employees and customers.

I stared into the distance while thinking about how bittersweet life could be, but the one in the most danger here was probably me since Nagisa had locked onto me! I couldn’t even imagine how the situation could get any worse!!

But I was readily proven wrong by what happened next.

A yellow dump truck that had to weigh more than ten tons crashed into the store, breaking through both the window and the blinds.

Part 6

It was more of a shockwave than a noise.

A horizontal downpour of glass and a far-too-large mass of metal passed by behind me. The neat line of sofas was knocked away, they crashed into the opposite wall, and some wiring must have been broken because the lights blinked unsteadily.

“Whoaaaaaa!? O-ow! What the hell!?”

The bearded man in a knit hat and sunglasses – Nakisuna-san was it? – shouted something, but he hadn’t actually been hit by the dump truck. One of the sofas seemed to have hit him in the waist. That didn’t matter, so I ignored him and looked around the messed-up store. Fortunately, I quickly spotted a familiar face.

“Are you okay, Shinobu-chan?”

“Are you, Nagisa? …Or rather, was anyone hit by that?”

“Eh heh heh. Shinobu-chan was worried about me…”

It was lucky there had been so few customers.

Those customers were all focused on the front of the dump truck that had crashed into the wall. We all hesitantly looked in that direction. …Was the driver okay? At the very least, the driver’s compartment hadn’t been crushed like an empty can.

The employees of course hadn’t been trained for something like this, so they had all frozen up.

Meanwhile, I heard a creaking noise.

The driver’s side door slowly opened and something fell out. At first I thought it was a trash bag, but it wasn’t. It was a human. It was a middle-aged man in a work uniform.

Or…was he really middle-aged? Something was wrong with his hair. It was really dry and nearly white. He also had muddy eyes and all of his skin had turned red or purple. Did he have internal bleeding? Was he hurt? From what I could see, his clothes weren’t stained red and his limbs weren’t bent at odd angles.

At first, no one moved to help him.

That may have been because no one was sure if he was a culprit or a victim.

But as time passed, the tense atmosphere relaxed and we gained more freedom of movement. The first one to be freed was that male customer named Nakisuna.

“The hell do you think you’re doing!?”

He held a hand on his back and angrily approached the driver who had slowly started standing up.

“Were you taught not to say you’re sorry even if you kill someone? Don’t even try to call yourself a victim after what you’ve done. Are you even listening? You should be bowing down and begging for forgiveness!!”

“W-wait, sir!?”

Once Nakisuna grabbed the driver’s collar, the male employee named Kamimaki frantically started climbing over the counter.

However, none of us could have predicted the rusty iron smell we detected a moment later.

With a raw sound, the middle-aged driver bit violently into Nakisuna’s wrist.

“Eh? Ah…?”

At first, the man in a knit hat and sunglasses simply looked confused.

The sound of someone chewing through chicken cartilage followed.

The pain and fear must have risen within him as if to remind him this was real.

“W-wai-you-wha-ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

He instinctually pulled his hand back, but was that the right decision or not?

Doing so threw the middle-aged driver off balance, causing him to fall on top of Nakisuna. It looked like an embrace between old friends reunited at the airport.

But a moment later, a deafening scream erupted from them.

The driver bit in and tore away a huge chunk of flesh from a point closer to the neck than the shoulder. Feathers from the down jacket floated through the air, but they were dyed red.

Nakisuna yelled and desperately struggled, but it was no use. He only managed to drop his wallet and Kasha-chan ashtray from his pocket.

“B-bfah!? Abhbhbhbh!! Bhbbhbh!! Y-y-you…you… bbbhbhbhbhbbhbhbhbhbhbbhb!?”

He wasn’t even speaking the human language anymore.

But Nakisuna wasn’t the only one.

Screams and shouts came from all around. Someone fell to the ground, but the others rushed toward the exit without even reaching out to help.

“H-help me!? Please help me!? What is going on!?”

That voice of tears and snot came from Nozaki-san the part-timer who was shaking her pale head. Akehara-san, the older employee who had been across the counter from Nakisuna, was beating on the male employee’s back, but when the man didn’t do anything, she clicked her tongue, moved her slender and stocking-covered legs, and walked out front herself.

Only then did my thoughts finally recover from their human camera mode.

I was urged into action more because I didn’t want to feel the guilt of letting the man die than because I felt the need to save him. I worked with the well-proportioned female employee in pumps to grab the middle-aged driver’s arms, wrap an arm around his waist, and try to forcibly pull him off.

I frowned when I felt an unpleasant stickiness, but I quickly realized that was the least of my worries.

“Wait…what!? He won’t budge!!”

“You’re kidding, right? Hey, you! Get off him! I said get off him!!”

It felt like playing tug-of-war against a forklift or power shovel. I was pulling hard enough that I thought a blood vessel in my head would burst, but he wouldn't move a millimeter.

In fact, I was pulled toward him.

He ignored our efforts and took a step forward.

"Wah!?"

"Kyah!!"

Akehara-san and I were swung around by the driver. Our legs gave out and we were dragged along the floor. Meanwhile, the driver leaned over Nakisuna who was lying face-up on the floor.

With a wet sound, the bloody smell grew stronger.

Nakisuna had been so noisy before, but now he was silent. His arms and legs were trembling unnaturally, but I doubted that was under his control.

Wait.

Isn't this really, really bad!?

This time, I grabbed his dry hair instead of his body, but it came right out. It made me shudder how easily it pulled out.

"Why you…!!"

Still on the ground, I grabbed the notebook-sized e-book reader that had fallen nearby and hit the back of the driver's head as he focused on moving his mouth. I heard a loud sound, but he didn't react. I hit him again, this time with the corner instead of the flat surface, but he completely ignored me.

Wh-what is with this guy!?

A hit to the back of the head with the corner of a normal notebook would at least make your vision flash from the pain, and this was a harder and heavier piece of electronics!

"Shinobu-chan…"

That was when I heard a girl's voice that sounded too gentle to belong in this scene.

"Hey, Shinobu-chan. I don't know what's going on, but should I help? It could be a joint effort powered by our love…just kidding."

"If you think you can help, then do something!! What is this guy? Is he really human!? Are we sure he isn't a Youkai that just really looks human!?"

It was possible I had overlooked the most basic concept here.

The bizarre sight of a human eating human flesh may have left my mind blank.

Otherwise, I never would have asked Nagisa of all people to help.

She held a shovel in her hands. It looked out of place in the cellphone store, so it may have been attached to the dump truck to help transfer dirt and gravel.

A moment later, I heard a dull sound.

She swung the shovel like a golf club and the heavy tip severed the driver's neck.

My legs seemed to have turned to rubber.

She held the heavy shovel's handle and spun it around like a baton. She skillfully controlled it even when moving her hands over her head or behind her back. It reminded me of a weapon in an online game I'd played. The weapon had looked like a cup on the end of a stick and had thrown a stone using centrifugal force. After building up power, it gave a roar.

The scene was so outlandish that it didn't seem real. The man's previous strength vanished, so Akehara-san and I tumbled backwards like the rope had broken in a game of tug-of-war. Then I heard a high-pitched scream reminiscent of shattering glass.

However, it was not in response to Nagisa decapitating someone.

Nor was it in response to the headless corpse falling on us.

"…Ah?"

We flipped the headless corpse off of us to see.

Even with the body cut away, the head continued to bite at Nakisuna's neck.

The dull chomping and chewing sounds continued and signified that the teeth were now crunching through bone instead of flesh and blood. What was this thing? Now that I thought about it, there hadn't been much blood. We hadn't been soaked by a red fountain.

Finally, I heard a dull snapping sound.

After biting clean though Nakisuna's flesh, the remaining head fell to the floor as if washed away by the red torrent of the living man. It rolled into a corner like a basketball, but I didn't feel like checking to see if it was still moving.

"Wh-what the hell is this?"

Something right in front of my eyes had drowned out even Nagisa's abnormality. It even overshadowed the fact that Nakisuna was lying utterly motionless on the floor.

"You've got to be kidding me. What the hell happened!?"

To distance myself from the situation, I had finally looked to the outside world beyond the completely shattered window. I was doing the same thing as the other customers who had already left.

And there I saw a colorful hell of reds and blacks.

To put it simply, none of those who had left were still around. To put it another way, that driver hadn't been the only abnormal monster. Put those two together and you get this:

Someone was pinned down by multiple other people.

I could hear a sound much like someone biting through chicken cartilage with their back teeth.

Someone else was dragging around something soft while still alive.

There were no screams or yells.

Everyone was trying to get back inside, but the monsters grabbed at their arms or legs.

It was an orgy of violence filled with muddy eyes, red and purple skin, and pale white hair.

It covered the entire city. I doubted I could find a window that wasn't broken. Cars had crashed into telephone poles and traffic lights and the screaming people inside were being dragged out by countless hands. The monsters weren't all muscular macho men. The kid I had seen running around before and the old man who had been sitting on the bench were among them. Those normal people's teeth weren't exactly sharp, but that made them look all the more horrifying when bared.

I had no idea if anyone was inside it anymore but a costume of the local Kasha-chan mascot was torn and lying on the side of the road. The fact that even it was being trampled underfoot made me feel like I was viewing the demise of morality.

I didn't have time to think about saving anyone or figuring out what to do.

It was already over, so I simply didn't have time to think.

I could tell at a glance that I couldn't save anyone by running out there.

And then countless eyes turned our way. The mouths and clothes of those emotionless figures were stained red. Akehara-san used both hands and leaned forward to shove aside the headless driver. Nozaki-san seemed to have been hiding somewhere until now, but she nervously showed up holding her shoes and a cloth pouch.

"K-Kamimaki-san, what should we do about locking the registers!?"

"What's with that old lady's pouch? …Don't tell me it's yours! And we need to lock this place up before worrying about the money! We can close the shutter to-…"

"Both of those can wait! We need to focus! This is no time to be worried about the business!!"

The argument between the nearby employees seemed so far away.

I subconsciously reached for my cellphone.

Only now did the obvious idea of calling the police come to mind.

But…

"Hey, let's get out of here."

My thoughts were cut off when someone grabbed my shoulder.

Kamimaki-san had ditched the more polite speech of a clerk to a customer.

“We can call the police afterwards!! They’ll rush in here and kill us while we’re waiting for the police to show up! The metal shutter isn’t as tough as it sounds. It’ll break pretty easily if a few dozen people try to break it down. We’re sitting ducks if we stay here! We need to get somewhere safe!!”

“But where would be safe!?”

My trembling fingers operated the phone as I shouted back at the man.

I dialed the simplest three-digit number, but something wasn’t right.

It wouldn’t connect. It wasn’t getting through at all!

“How should I know? But we’re screwed if we hole up in this tiny building. Luckily, we have the dump truck here. Don’t you think we’d be better off escaping outside the city!?”

I could almost feel common sense crumbling away inside my mind, but it was obvious staying here would lead to the same fate as those who had gone outside.

“Let’s go with that. Can you drive!?”

“It’s basically a giant stick shift, right? I think it’s worth a try when the alternative is giving up!”

With that comment, time seemed to start moving once more.

While the dump truck was big, it couldn’t hold very many people. Only three at the most. Nagisa and I would let the store employees take those spots. We would instead climb into the back of the truck, where the gravel and dirt would normally be carried.

“Nagisa!! That’s fine with you, right? If we don’t hurry up, they’ll start pouring in here! So hurry up and-…!!”

I trailed off because something rose from the floor next to me.

It was Nakisuna whose neck had been eaten into down to the bone.

“Wha-…eh?”

My mind went blank.

He got up only a few dozen centimeters away. It was hard to tell if his hair had changed color since his hair was dyed, but his eyes were muddy and his skin had darkened. His arms grabbed at my leg like a kid throwing a tantrum. If this was the same as before, then he was holding me with the same strength as a brown bear or grizzly bear. When I recalled how Nakisuna himself had been killed, intense rejection filled the back of my mind.

But that was when Nagisa's shovel gave a roar.

The tip of the shovel stabbed into the seam where his neck bone was already visible. She placed her foot on the shovel and kicked him over. Then she placed her full weight on the heel pressing against the shovel.

With a dull snapping sound, the head rolled away like a ball.

Strength left the headless body and Nagisa shoved it away.

She then spoke to me, not looking any different from normal.

"Hurry up, Shinobu-chan."

"…"

I realized just how insane, twisted, and wrong this all was.

But not because of how Nagisa was acting.

It was because this situation was making me glad to have her around.

Part 7 (3rd person)

As soon as the kotatsu was pulled out from the Jinnai house's storage shed, it had become the Nekomata's independent kingdom.

However, that Nekomata was now yawning grumpily and scratching her ear with her back paw a short distance from the kotatsu.

There was a simple reason: the Furutsubaki (Small) had holed up inside the kotatsu's blanket.

When Shinobu's Youkai-loving mother asked what was going on, the Furutsubaki (Small) had stuck just her head out and shouted at the top of her lungs with her cheeks puffed out.

"She ate my pudding!! It even had 'Furutsubaki' written on it in permanent ink!!"

"Hmm… But Furutsubaki could refer to two different Youkai in this house."

"She did the same thing with the cookies, the chocolate, and the snow viewing popsicle!! She has to be getting it wrong on purpose. She always eats my stuff!!"

"Then why not write Furutsubaki (Small) next time?"

"And what is that small part referring to!? My height or my chest!? That's an important distinction!!"

Shinobu's mother was unfazed by the shrill complaints.

"You don't have to worry about the pudding. I can make you some."

"…You can make it?"

That must have touched at her heartstrings because Kotatsu Fortress Furutsubaki (Small) twitched in response.

"You can make pudding!? How!?"

"Heh heh heh. I grew up in a traditional Japanese restaurant, so I rebelled against my parents by learning how to make nothing but Western food."

That said, the woman had only gained that Western bias after absorbing all the skills of a well established high-class restaurant in Kyoto, so she was clearly highly skilled. And after more or less eloping to marry into the Jinnai family, she had absorbed the skills of Shinobu's grandmother as well.

"You can…you can make pudding?"

The Furutsubaki (Small)'s heart had had been shaken by this shocking truth, so she crawled a bit out from the kotatsu.

However, she soon came back to her senses.

"Ah!? No, no. I'm not mad because I can't eat pudding. I'm mad because she stole my pudding! I won't accept anything that doesn't punish her!!"

"C'mon, that doesn't really matter, does it?"

"It does! It really, really matters!!"

"C'mon, c'mon. Stay in that kotatsu and you'll ruin your clothes. Do you really want that hair decoration to be all wrinkled once Shinobu gets back? Your kimono will be wrinkled too."

"…"

The Furutsubaki (Small) finally fell silent and then crawled out from under the kotatsu.

However…

"This doesn't mean I'm not angry! I'm not moving from this spot until she's been punished!!"

"Yes, yes."

It looked like the area around the kotatsu was going to remain her territory after all. If Shinobu, the legendary Furutsubaki Meister, had been there, he could have driven her to ecstasy by listing off 100 good points about each of those two Youkai who were nearly indistinguishable, but the Nekomata was sick of it all and decided to leave the room for a while.

The floorboards were too cold to curl up on the veranda in November, and there was another commotion out in the yard anyway.

The Yuki Onna was hopping up and own with her hands in the air.

“It’s here. My season is finally here!! The first snow… My virgin snow!! Heh…eh heh heh…eh heh heh heh heh heh heh heh!!”

“Seriously? That explains why it’s been so cold today. Snow is such a pain when it accumulates…”

The Nekomata was really annoyed now, but the Yuki Onna was not listening.

“Keh heh heh. Yes, yes. I can feel my power growing… This is what it means to be a Yuki Onna. The summer heat was robbing me of half my charm before, but look at me now, Jinnai Shinobu! This is a true Yuki Onna!!”

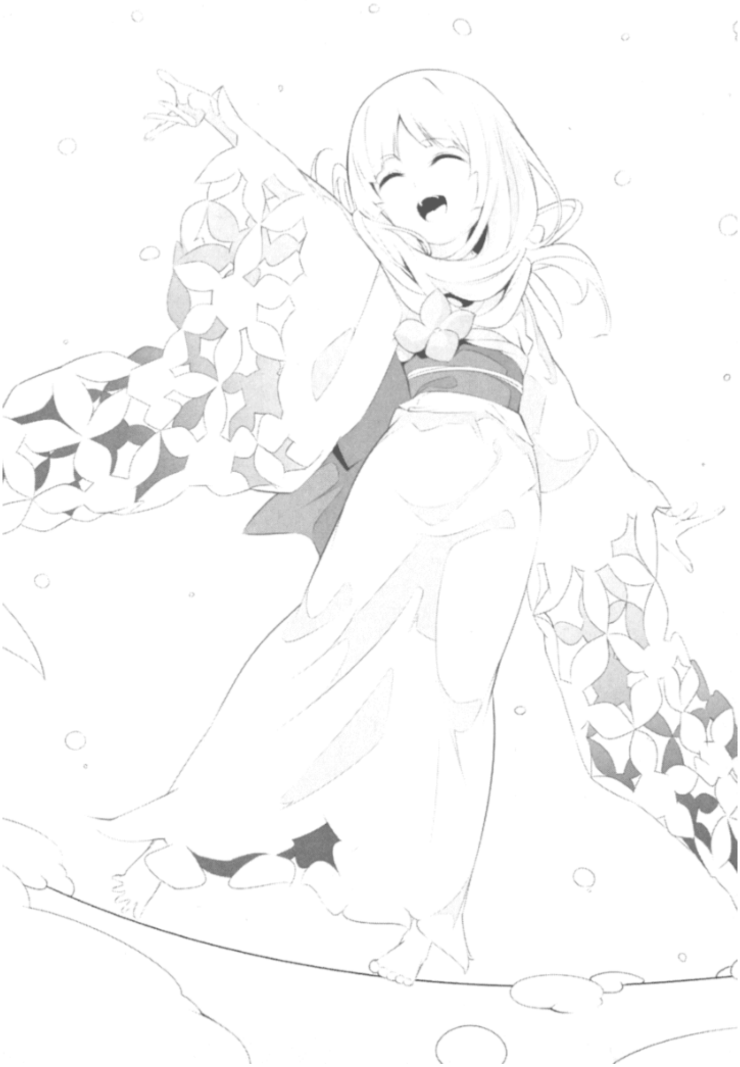
“She’s at full power? Is she going to turn into a fully grown woman or something?”

The Yuki Onna’s small body began to glow and the glow soon grew to an explosion of light. A flash of light as bright as the sun lasted a few seconds.

And afterwards…

“…Wait.”

“Ahh…”



The Yuki Onna was now even younger.

If Jinnai Shinobu had seen it, he probably would have covered his face with his hands.

The sleeves of her kimono had also changed to create snowflake cut-outs.

The Zashiki Warashi had come out after hearing the commotion, and she narrowed her eyes while giving her opinion.

"Which way are you trying to go?"

"Come to think of it, you had something of a chest during the summer, didn't you? Don't tell me the more power you get from the weather, the smaller you get."

"But didn't she get smaller when the hot bathwater weakened her? She melted a little."

"So she shrinks when it's hot and she shrinks when it's cold? I can already imagine that lustful kid holding his head in his hands."

The Yuki Onna's white clothing was a symbol of virginity, so it was not altogether wrong for her to grow more virginal the more her power grew.

There were also stories of travelers inviting the Yuki Onna to take a hot bath, not knowing what she was, and then finding an icicle floating in the tub.

In other words, she could easily grow smaller whichever direction she went.

"Well, if she's happy, I guess that's all that matters."

"It looks like a kind of curse to me."

But as the other two Youkai were speaking…

"…?"

The Zashiki Warashi's gaze jumped upwards.

Part 8

It was beginning to snow a little.

I heard occasional heavy clunking noises as the large dump trunk drove through the city that reeked of death. Nagisa and I were sitting in the large metal bucket on the back, so we couldn't see what was going on outside. However, that may have been for the best.

I couldn't see anything in the horizontal direction, but I could see a little bit when I looked upwards.

An old man on a building's rooftop was burning a banner to call for help. The banner was advertising a winter festival, so the Kasha-chan was smiling and announcing that Shouryou City, Kumotsu City, and other partner cities around the country would be celebrating too.

I saw plenty of windows stained red by something on the inside.

Occasionally, a window would shatter and a bunch of violent white-haired figures would pour down like a waterfall.

There were even some living people who had lost all hope and jumped out on their own.

And that was only a small fraction of our surroundings. If I had a clear view of everything, it might have fried some kind of wiring inside me.

"It's like a zombie movie…"

I heard a voice from my cellphone.

It belonged to Kamimaki-san in the driver's seat. With some of us inside the truck and some of us outside, we couldn't speak directly, so we were using our phones as transceivers. Instead of talking via a cellphone tower like normal, our phones were directly connected to each other. I think it was using the same service that wirelessly connects your phone to your printer. Yes, it was the same thing Ranzono Sachi had used during that Oomukade incident.

There was an incredibly simple reason we were using them that way.

Phone calls, emails, and even emergency calls to the police or firefighters weren’t working. Basically, anything that used the cellphone towers. Due to all this trouble, I hadn’t actually gotten a replacement phone or battery and I was a little worried about it overheating, but I had much bigger things to worry about.

“There are corpses everywhere. Some have been torn to pieces and others have gotten up after being eaten. I don’t know what’s going on, but it looks like the dead become one of them.”

Zombies.

Hearing that word almost made me laugh. The common sense governing this small world of mine had completely broken if I needed to use that word to plan for survival.

“What caused it doesn’t matter,” I said. “Someone else will look into it. Let’s leave that to the police and focus on getting out of the city. Staying here would be way too dangerous.”

“Agreed. But this definitely isn’t normal. I wonder if a Package related to some kind of Youkai is involved.”

Another vibration shook the truck.

I grimaced and leaned my back against the wall of the giant bucket.

I suppressed the urge to vomit.

It might have been a rural city, but an asphalt road would never be that bumpy. Then what was causing those vibrations? No one was worrying about the traffic lights and zombies were wandering around in search of prey, so what was it the dump truck’s tires were running over?

It wasn’t hard to figure out.

Ahh, ahh.

The dead were rising, zombies were flooding the streets, and human forms were devouring human flesh. I was focusing on all of that, but was it possible we had actually killed more people than anyone else in this city?

“What’s the matter, Shinobu-chan?”

"…Nagisa?"

"You don't look well. If you're worried about something, I might be able to help. …Hee hee. A couple is supposed to share their troubles and their joys."

Nagisa was acting completely normal while embracing the bloody shovel like a stuffed animal.

What had made her like this?

My relationship with her had completely crumbled during middle school, but something else had more directly broken her.

"Don't look so depressed. You didn't do anything wrong. What? Did you want me to punch you or something?"

Her grandfather had said that to me.

Yes, that was it.

She had always had a St. Bernard with her. Like the Zashiki Warashi for me, that dog had been her partner since before she had even been born. But a pet was not the same as a Youkai. Even if the delicious food of an Intellectual Village allowed them to live a longer and happier life than normal, a dog would grow old in ten or fifteen years and they could even succumb to a variety of illnesses. Their motor functions could deteriorate, their organs could grow diseased, or they could come down with dementia or Alzheimer's.

That St. Bernard's final days had been especially bad. He apparently hadn't been able to distinguish his owner of over a decade from a complete stranger. He couldn't move very well, but he had bared his fangs and barked at anyone who came close. Even his family had to be careful when giving him his food or they would get bitten. That had apparently continued for quite a while.

But one night, he had been unable to get up inside his cage and he had continued drooling and barking without end. Nagisa had apparently approached him then.

The shriek that had followed had apparently been indelibly burned into her grandfather's ears.

When Nagisa had returned, she had been covered in blood. That was the result of embracing the St. Bernard for a long, long time while he could not recognize her. She had been torn up from being bitten all over, but she had given a two word report with her expression frozen in place like ice: “It’s over.”

What had that felt like?

Saying that he wasn’t human was no consolation. He had been with her since the moment she was born, if not earlier, and she had to have completely taken his presence for granted. Even if he could not be spoken with, he was still a member of her family. What had it felt like to watch his life declining, see him do nothing but suffer, and then take his life with her own hands in the very, very end? The rest of her family had been unable to do it, but that girl had borne all the responsibility and been broken by it.

It would be a lot like me breaking that Good-for-Nothing Youkai’s neck.

“So it wasn’t your fault. It’s our fault that Nagisa started pursuing ‘eternal love’ and ‘unbreakable bonds’ like they were the mantra of some kind of cult. If you stay with Nagisa now, it really would wear down your life. No one will blame you if you leave her.”

After thinking through all that, I slowly shook my head.

I was fleeing reality in favor of my thoughts. My memories of Nagisa weren’t going to show me a way to survive this extreme situation. The only reason I was losing myself in those memories was to avoid facing the reality before my eyes.

“What do we do now?”

I didn’t want to stay in this city, so I was all for leaving. But would we really be safe then? Who ever said this disaster was limited to this one city?

Besides, the Intellectual Village we lived in was only a mountain away. If this had spread there, the situation could hardly be worse.

I had a phone, but I couldn’t reach them.

If I could only call the Zashiki Warashi’s smartphone and check to see if they were okay, I could lift one weight from my heart.

My thoughts were cut off again.

I heard a loud sound of clashing metal. The dump truck came to a sudden stop and both Nagisa and I were shaken around in the giant bucket. We ended up in a pile together. I could feel her soft body in my arms, but I focused on shouting into my phone.

“What happened!?”

“Th-this is Nozaki! Um, the way is blocked by crashed cars. A whole bunch of cars were abandoned after crashing. We tried to push through them with the dump truck’s power, but it isn’t working very well…”

“This is awful…”

The truck backed up and drove down a different road, but the situation gradually came into focus.

“Shinobu-chan, it looks like there are traffic jams on all the roads.”

“Of course there are. If a single car is stopped on the road, it stops everyone behind it.”

“Eh heh. But we’ll be fine. We know each other well enough to fight in the line at an amusement park.”

Things were awfully quiet for a traffic jam. I couldn’t hear any angrily honking horns or the rumbling of engines. The stillness of death hung over everything.

But that was hardly surprising. It was obvious what the zombies would do to the drivers once the cars came to a stop. The more victims there were, the more abandoned cars there were. Everyone would of course try to leave the city with this going on, so the routes out of the city had been the first to be blocked up by abandoned cars. The bridges and tunnels were probably impassable.

Even the heavy dump truck could not defy the prearranged layout of the roads. We couldn’t leave the roads and destroy the city as we went.

I could hear the three in the driver’s compartment arguing.

“What do we do!? Avoiding the traffic jams is fine, but aren’t we just circling around and around now!?”

“But we can’t just stop! There are zombies everywhere. If we stop, they'll grab onto the truck!!"

"But we don't have an unlimited supply of gas. Wh-what do we do?"

What to do now really was the million dollar question. The more we avoided the traffic jams and abandoned cars, the farther we moved from the city's exits. But even if we tried to force our way out, not even this dump truck could keep moving while pushing aside all those cars. If we hit our limit and came to a stop, we would definitely be surrounded by zombies. But even if we drove around aimlessly, we would run out of gas and meet the same fate.

"Hey, Shinobu-chan. Maybe it would be best to find somewhere to hide before we run out of gas."

"But where!? Schools and hospitals are covered in windows. If we holed up in there, the zombies could get in from just about anywhere!"

The dump truck was actually a decent fortress since it was a moving box and a moving weapon.

However, it would not last forever.

The routes out of the city were blocked off. If we just drove around inside the city, we would only be waiting until we ran out of gas.

I started to panic, but then I looked up into the sky.

Wait…

"Hey, doesn't Bozen City sometimes do that…what's it called? That sport where you fly around with a giant propeller attached to a parachute-like thing! Para…um, para…what was it? Oh, damn. I thought of it not long ago."

"Paragliding."

"Yes, that! Paragliding! I don't know the details, though!!"

"Yes, there's something like that at the mountain peak. Was it called the Dog Square? They have a facility that raises one or two hundred pedigree dogs. I believe it doubles as a paragliding airfield."

"Do you have to bring your own machine or can you rent them?"

They all briefly fell silent.

Yes. Even if we couldn't get out, as long as we could freely use the roads inside the city, we could drive up to the mountain peak. And if we escaped through the sky, we wouldn't have to worry about the zombies biting at us.

"I don't know, but it's a better bet than waiting around for us to run out of gas."

I heard the large tires tearing into the road and the dump truck changed direction.

We were on our way to the air route.

If this didn't work, our situation was going to be hopeless indeed.

Part 9

The dump truck drove along a mountain road.

Riding along that winding road in a giant truck was disconcerting enough, but it was also beginning to snow and we had neither tire chains nor studless tires.

Leaving the city center distanced us from the bloody hell of those damn zombies, so I stood up inside the bucket and checked on the outside world from above the side.

“With the weather like this, we might have been screwed if we’d taken half an hour longer to make up our minds,” said Kamimaki-san as he drove.

Unlike in the Intellectual Village, this mountain was not highly maintained. I had expected nothing but dense woods, but it looked like things were different here. I could see some occasional roofs along the slope.

“There are houses here,” I commented. “Why would they build them in such an inconvenient place?”

“Um, I’ve heard this was actually the original Bozen City.”

“?”

“Or maybe I should say that, in an older age, the height of your residence was directly linked to your social status in Bozen City. The social classes were arranged from the peak to the base. The base has been developed more in recent years for transportation and the other services, but real estate, banks, and other important stores are still built on the mountain.”

That was enough to depress me.

If there were a ton of people on the mountain, then there could be zombies here too.

I was thinking about that, but Nagisa seemed to be thinking about something else entirely.

“But in that case, why is that Dog Square place at the very peak,

Shinobu-chan?”

“What?”

“The peak of the mountain would be the best spot, right? So I would have expected to find a castle or mansion there.”

It was admittedly strange, but the local data on this neighboring town didn’t matter right now. We needed to focus on how to survive these zombies.

“I’d like to get to the peak before the snow really starts piling up,” said Kamimaki-san as the dump truck started across a metal bridge over a valley.

“Shinobu-chan, do you know how to fly a paraglider?”

“I don’t want to think about it. We can only pray it’s easier than riding a unicycle.”

“Eh heh heh. If we’re going to do it, we should ride one together. Do they call that riding tandem? You can be below and I’ll be on top. I’ll be on your lap like this.”

She seemed happy with anything as long as it involved romance.

I breathed a sigh at her overall happiness, but then explosions occurred at the base of the bridge’s legs.

The bridge began to fall, starting from the back.

In this short time, I’d come to understand something.

No matter how unreasonable the situation and even if you didn’t know who was responsible, you still wanted to complain.

“Bwah!? Wh-what the hell is this!? Why would you do that!?”

The dump truck shook violently.

Someone had likely covered explosives in adhesive and dangled them down on ropes to stick them in place. Only the back of the bridge had been blown up, but the damage created differences in height along the rest of the bridge too. It was falling. It was being swallowed up by the bottom of the valley. An extra large tremor ran through the truck, so I guessed Kamimaki-san had floored it. It sounded like the engine was going to burn out and the 10+ ton mass raced along the newly sloped bridge.

We just barely made it.

As soon as the truck reached the opposite end of the valley, the bridge completely fell away.

“What do you think that was!?” asked Kamimaki-san.

“If they were targeting us, they would have placed the bomb in the middle of the road instead of on the bridge,” I answered. “Maybe they were trying to close the castle gates so none of the zombies can get in from the city at the base of the mountain.”

“Hmm. In that case, Shinobu-chan…”

“I don’t know where they came from, but the area up here might still be safe.”

Part of that assumption was the fact that my heart couldn’t bear the alternative.

“We can’t exactly complain when we’ve been running right through all the red lights with this dump truck, but it’s hard to believe they’re already doing this,” said Akehara-san. “They’re willing to use explosives to stay alive, and they’re willing to block the route to anyone else who might need to escape. The zombies might not be all we have to worry about. If we don’t do something soon, we won’t be able to trust any humanoid creatures we-…”

She trailed off because the large dump truck gently braked in the middle of the mountain road.

We were just approaching a large thatch-roof house built to be buried in the greenery.

I could see outside by peering over the bucket’s walls, but I couldn’t see straight ahead because the driver’s compartment was even taller.

“Why did we stop?” I asked.

“There are a few metal drums lying in the way. …They aren’t more bombs, are they?”

“No, wait. Wait!! Kamimaki-san, back up now!!”

"Eh? Nozaki-san?"

"They aren't bombs! Oh, honestly. They were meant to make us stop the-…!!"

It happened before she could finish.

With the sound of splitting air, orange sparks scattered from the bucket's side wall.

At first I couldn't figure out why lightning had struck so nearby, but my mind slowly caught up and sent a chill out to my body.

A hunting…rifle!?

"If you don't want to die, then get out of there! Hand over the truck and we won't kill you!!"

"Yes! Someone finally drove by. We're saved! Now we can reach the paragliders at the peak. That thread of hope is ours!!"

Four or five men and women came out of hiding. They may have shared a box because they all held identical cigarettes in their mouths. There was a fairly steep slope just beyond the guardrail and they had apparently been hiding at that cliff-like point waiting for a vehicle to drive by.

Were they from the house right nearby? Or were they someone else entirely?

"You, blond boy in the back there!! You get out too. That leaves you with more of a chance than being shot and dumped on the road."

I raised my hands when they aimed my way using a hunting rifle with a wooden stock.

I couldn't make careless eye contact and I had to keep my thoughts silently in my head.

Nagisa.

She was sitting next to me in the giant bucket and rubbing her cheek against my thigh. She and her knit kitty nurse outfit were completely hidden from view, so no one had noticed that extreme yandere girl was there.

"…"

Her fingertips left my leg and she started to grab the shovel next to her instead. I placed a foot on the shovel's handle as an unseen sign that she should stop. Then I obeyed the ambushers' instructions and got out of the dump truck.

Akehara-san, Kamimaki-san, and Nozaki-san left the driver's seat and passenger's seat at about the same time. It didn't look like the ambushers were after money because they didn't show any interest in Akehara-san's earring or Nozaki-san's cloth pouch.

Strangely, the homemade weapon made by wrapping barbed wire around a metal bat seemed much more ominous than the hunting rifle.

I gulped and asked a question.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Look in the mirror and you'll understand. The only difference is whether we tried everything we could to survive or not."

"How much do you know about the zombies? What are they!?"

"Let me ask you this: would you tell us if our situations were reversed?"

Black-haired Kamimaki-san forced out his voice despite the corner of his mouth convulsing a little.

"P-please wait. The back of the truck can probably hold a dozen people. I'll give you the key and I don't care who's in the driver's seat, but you have no real reason to leave us here!"

"I don't know what you've done to get this far, but did you take on even one extra survivor in that time?"

"…"

"This is the same. It isn't about how many people will fit. How long will this zombie panic continue? How much food and water will we have? How many weapons and shields will we have? The more people we have, the more people will screw up and turn into zombies. And we don't even know how many paragliders there are at the peak. So what possible reason do we have for picking up more living people?”

A reason.

In this world, you had to weigh a human life against that word.

Even something as basic as stopping on the red light and crossing on the green light seemed horribly distant now.

“There you have it. We’ll leave you here, but we won’t kill you. We won’t do anything as sleazy as bring just the girls with us either. Not because we have a conscience left, though. *Because we don’t have time to get sidetracked with something like that.* Oh, but you can still try to reach the peak without the truck. And if there are any paragliders left after we’ve escaped, then you might be able to escape too.”

That was when I spotted something incredibly unpleasant out of the corner of my eye: Nagisa.

That girl poked her head above the bucket wall to peer out.

What is she doing?

Immediately, my thoughts seemed to explode into a million pieces.

Oh, no.

She hadn’t been swinging her shovel around beheading people because they were zombies.

She placed all seven billion people on this planet into one of four categories: Enemy, ally, not interested, and extreme love. The zombies had fallen into the “enemy” category for her. Then what about these people trying to steal our dump truck…no, these people aiming weapons at Jinnai Shinobu?

I could tell sweat was pouring from my body.

We had hardly been in the clear before, but this would definitely step completely out of bounds.

But even as I started breathing heavily, the situation had progressed far further than I could have imagined.

Nagisa grinned and pointed her slender finger into the distance.

A moment later, I heard a dull sound and a chunk of flesh was bitten out of the hunting rifle man's shoulder.

"Ah…eh?"

His eyes opened to the limit at this sudden pain. Meanwhile, time continued to pass. I heard a wet sound. I saw white hair, muddy eyes, and purple skin. A monster with chunks of flesh missing from his side and thigh similarly chewed on someone else's flesh.

It was a zombie.

Five or six of them had suddenly appeared from a nearby thicket on the wall-like slope. No, there were still more. I could hear rustling from within.

…Hm? They came from the slope?

"Agfwah!? Wh-what? B-b-b-but the bridge was… There shouldn't be any zombies here ye-…bgweh!!"

His voice grew distorted at the end, but not because a zombie had bitten through his windpipe.

One of his own companions had used a metal bat wrapped in barbed wire to smash the bitten man's head in.

"*We're not wasting our time with a guy we know's turning into a zombie,*" he spat out. "More importantly, we need that rifle!! We need to push them back from-…!!"

He too trailed off.

Just like in a movie or a drama, someone else had kicked away the rifle that had fallen to the road.

"Wha-…?"

The bat man looked up and the cigarette fell from his open mouth.

It was refreshing-looking Kamimaki-san. The trembling young man was backing up while nearly falling backwards. He was trying to get as far away as possible.

But from what?

From the white-haired zombies of course.

Who became the next target was determined by who did and didn’t move during the next few seconds.

“Bhah!? Gah!! You…you piece of…!!”

Swarming purple flesh, a human form swallowed up, chewing sounds, and a single arm writhing through the air. While still trembling and moving back, Kamimaki-san repeated the same thing over and over like a magic spell.

“I didn’t kill him, I didn’t kill him!!”

The bat man had only been thinking about getting the rifle and pushing back the zombies, so he hadn’t thought about how he would escape.

All that remained was a hellish scene of screams. I had no clue where they all came from, but more and more white-haired zombies jumped out toward the ambushers. Their weapons actually seemed to have worked against them. They briefly stopped to decide between fight and flight, but if they had turned tail and run without hesitation, they might have escaped without being bitten.

“H-hurry! We need to get out of here!! Onto the truck! Hurry!!”

Kamimaki-san shouted to us while grabbing for the dump truck’s driver’s side door.

I heard a solid sound.

“Eh?”

And then a slight voice of surprise.

Before Kamimaki-san could even open the door, a dry-haired zombie seemed to embrace him. He didn’t even have time to scream before it bit into his shoulder. A powerful stench of blood scattered as his flesh was torn by familiar human teeth rather than a mechanical blade or bestial fangs.

“Bhah!! Bhahh!?”

“W-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

Akehara-san with her chestnut hair tied back grabbed the barbed wire bat with her neatly manicured fingers and swung it around with all her might. The first blow knocked off the zombie's right arm, the second collided with Kamimaki-san's shoulder, and the third struck the zombie's head.

With the sound of a rotten watermelon being crushed, the shape of that head greatly changed. White hair scattered around, the shape of the purple jaw crumbled, and Kamimaki-san's shoulder was finally released.

The zombie continued to walk around, so she managed to drag Kamimaki-san and his reddened pale green uniform away.

The dump truck was a lost cause now.

"It doesn't matter where!! We just need to escape to somewhere, Nagisa!!"

"Hee hee. I'll go anywhere you tell me, Shinobu-chan."

A single form nimbly jumped down from the dump truck bucket.

A few of the zombies seemed to notice her, but she was faster.

I heard the shovel give a roar and then heard a number of impacts. Sometimes she intentionally shook the shovel in front of them, swept their feet out from under them when they bit at it, and swung the shovel down into the back of their head to smash it open. Sometimes she swung the shovel to smash their knees, pressed the metal tip against their neck when they collapsed, placed her heel on the shovel, and severed the neck. Nozaki-san seemed caught off guard as she held her cloth pouch in her arms.

"I-if she can do all that, couldn't we leave it all to her?"

That was when I heard the sound of something thick breaking.

The shovel's handle had broken near the front and flown into the distance with the metal part attached.

Nagisa looked at the broken wood and threw the remaining handle aside.

"It came off. Looks like that's as much as I can do."

"R-run!!"

Part 10

It was all a complete mess.

We ran with all our might while supporting Kamimaki-san whose shoulder flesh had been bitten away. The only nearby shelter was the thatch-roof house by the road. The one piece of luck was how almost all of the zombies were busy devouring the flesh of the ambushers. At any rate, we ran inside the old house with Nagisa and Akehara-san. We weren't in any state to even think about removing our shoes.

We quickly locked the door from the inside, but how much would that really help?

The sliding door did not seem anywhere near as reliable as an apartment door. I had a feeling it would be knocked from its rails right away even when locked.

"What…what are we supposed to do?"

This was not a fortress of bricks. It had paper sliding doors, glass windows, and wooden rain shutters. Zombies aside, even I probably could have kicked my way into the house.

Once the gore scattered on the road was gone, they would definitely come here, so what could we do in the meantime?

"Oh, my☆" said Nagisa as she viewed the items hanging on the hallway walls. "Look, Shinobu-chan, there's hunting gear all over the place."

In addition to umbrellas and straw raincoats, there were ropes and wooden frames worn on the back to help carry things. When I looked closer, I even found something like a 150 centimeter square cage. It had a large entrance and it was made to drop a guillotine.

It was a bear-hunting cage.

"Does that mean they have hunting gear made to kill bears?"

That hunting rifle may have come from this house.

Meanwhile, Nagisa grabbed something from the wall like she was window shopping.

“Oh, this is cute. What do you think, Shinobu-chan? Does it suit me? Hee hee…”

It was a cattle cleaver.

As the name suggested, it was a thick blade used to cut a giant cow into individual pieces. A normal machete would only be thirty to forty centimeters long, but this was almost as long as a Japanese sword. And given the thickness of the blade, it had to weigh more than a sword.

The name printed at the base was Namagusa. It was an archaic term for killing and meat-eating, making it an ironic name for a zombie killer.

She had done so well with the shovel, so what would happen if she wielded that specialized cattle cleaver?

The zombies weren’t my only worry. I needed to keep an eye on Nagisa’s actions too.

“More importantly, did you see a first-aid kit anywhere?”

Sexy Akehara-san cut in while touching her earring, perhaps as a habit that helped calm her.

“Kamimaki-san’s wound is bleeding more than I expected! We need to stop the bleeding!!”

That gave us a task to focus on.

We had no ideas on how to fortify ourselves here or to escape, so this may have been something like reading a manga you found while cleaning your room.

We checked the shelves in the living room and other rooms, but didn’t find anything. It was possible those ambushers had taken the first aid kit with them. We ended up compromising by grabbing a towel, some cloths, and a bundle of old Japanese paper and then laying Kamimaki-san on the floor.

“Pant, pant…”

He was bleeding more than I had thought.

Akehara-san had been right.

I didn't know what a "pallid complexion" specifically referred to, but this may have been it. A muddy yellow seemed to be seeping out from below his nearly white skin. His hair color didn't look right either. It was rapidly drying out and losing its color. His breathing was shallow and his eyes were wandering lazily, but he was sweating quite profusely.

"A-anyway…anyway, we'll stop the bleeding now! Kamimaki-san, stay strong and don't you go to sleep!!"

Akehara-san called out to him again and again and pressed the towel and cloths against his shoulder…well, actually more like his neck. They rapidly grew red, so he might have really been in trouble. I knew how to disinfect a wound and close it up with a bandaid or bandage, but there was nothing I could do beyond that. If it needed to be sewn up, what were we supposed to do?

"Please…"

Kamimaki-san spoke with sweat pouring from his brow, but he didn't seem to be feeling pain anymore.

His unfocused eyes wandered aimlessly, his voice was feverishly weak, and he did not seem to be speaking to anyone in particular.

"I'm scared. I'm afraid of becoming like that and of having my heart crushed by the fear. Either way, I'll turn into a monster. So…"

"No! No!! I won't let that happen!!"

Akehara-san continued pressing against the wound and shouted as if to hold back the blood with her voice. She was so worked up that her hair began to fray.

Meanwhile, Nagisa was pouring the contents of an electric water boiler into a small teapot.

She unconcernedly pointed toward the papers placed on the tatami mats.

"Look at this, Shinobu-chan."

"Wh-what!? This really isn't the time…"

"But it says something interesting."

She was referring to one of the things we had gathered to use in place of bandages: the bundle of Japanese paper I had grabbed.

The serpentine writing was hard to read, but a few points were just barely legible.

“It says ‘Kasha’, Shinobu-chan.”

“Kasha?”

The first thing that came to mind was local Kasha-chan mascot I had seen on the strap, torn costume, and banner for the winter festival back in the city at the base of the mountain.

But what kind of Youkai had it originally been?

Hmm.

“?”

I started tilting my head in thought, but then I realized something.

It wasn’t just the old piece of paper Nagisa was pointing at.

The hanging scroll on the wall, the folding screen in a corner of the room, and the scroll in a picture frame all depicted the Kasha.

What I had grabbed seemed to have originally been a traditionally-bound book, so I checked the hard paper cover.

What does this say? Kasha Evil Sealing Festival, maybe?

After the trouble I had reading old kanji back at Zenmetsu Village, I had studied up on it a bit. This seemed to be some kind of manual, but I couldn’t actually read the contents.

I looked to the hanging scroll and folding screen instead.

The images were drawn in a flat style very different from the Western style of perspective. It depicted flames, wind, skeletons, a round bucket, and what looked like a black shadow dancing on the roof. It was a very disconcerting image. It reminded me of a caricature of the grim reaper spreading the plague in Europe that I had seen in my history textbook.

And as I stared at it, something in the back of my mind was gradually stimulated.

Wasn't it…yes, it was a Youkai that steals corpses from funerals and graves. No, it possesses the corpses and…huh? Did it control them? I can't quite remember the details, but I know it did something bad with corpses. Except I don't think just any corpse would do. Didn't it steal only the corpses of sinners? Since having a corpse stolen by the Kasha would bring shame to the family, I think they had some kind of charm that prevented it from ruining the funeral. I think it looked something like a burning cat, but did it really?

"But."

It stole corpses.

It moved corpses.

"*Could these zombies be connected to that Youkai*?"

"There's one other thing," said Nagisa as she poured tea into the matching teacups meant for a husband and wife. "It says 'Mikuchi-sama' here, but it's mentioned like a place name. …Ugh, this is second flush tea. Well, I suppose it could be worse while outside of an Intellectual Village. But you might be fine since you like your coffee black, Shinobu-chan. Eh heh heh."

"Mikuchi-sama?"

I didn't think that was a Youkai. I'd certainly never heard of it before.

I followed Nagisa's gaze to select one of the scattered pieces of Japanese paper. It seemed to be an old document written with brush and black ink. Something like underground water veins were wriggling across a cross-section of Bozen City's mountain. That looked several centuries old, but some sort of clear film had been placed over it. The newer writing on top of that looked quite modern and included the word Kasha.

No, wait.

What if these aren't underground water veins? What if they're hand-dug tunnels?

There were still a lot of mysteries surrounding where the zombies had originally come from. I had assumed they had appeared in the city at the base and gradually made their way up the mountain from there, but they had been walking around the mountain even after the bridge had been blown up.

But what if this was where they had come from?

What if they came from deep within the mountain? What if the original zombies had appeared from the countless tunnels filling the mountain like an ant colony?

Earlier the zombies had appeared from a thicket growing on the wall-like slope, so couldn't there have been a cave entrance hidden by that tall grass?

What?

What is this Mikuchi-sama?

"That doesn't matter."

My thoughts were cut off by a female voice that seemed to carry a curse.

It was Akehara-san's and a few strands of her frayed hair had fallen into her mouth.

"There's someone! Right here!! That we might be able to help!! So none of that other stuff matters! Hurry up and help already!!"

I heard the sliding door opening and saw Nozaki-san walk in.

Akehara-san naturally snapped at her too.

"What do you think you're doing!? You're always manipulating Kamimaki-san and being nothing but a nuisance! But when you can actually help him, all you do is wander around with that granny's pouch!? Don't you want to repay him for what he's done for you!?"

Nozaki-san's response was slightly delayed. It was a subtle thing, like the sound cutting out of an online video for a fraction of a second, but it dangerously scorched my nerves for some reason.

Afterwards, Nozaki Haru spoke with a dull light in her eyes.

"Oh. Are you two still alive?"

Akehara-san's mouth flapped silently, but it did not seem to bother Nozaki-san. In fact, she pulled something from her cloth pouch and sprinkled its contents onto Akehara-san's head.

Is that a Kasha-chan…ashtray?

“That should do it. How about you quit trying to dress up your ugliness? This suits you better, don’t you think?”

“Bweh! Cough, cough!! What the hell are you-…!?”

I thought Akehara-san was going to explode, but I was wrong.

The great energy created by a wave of people crashed into her. The sliding screen wall behind Nozaki Haru was torn to shreds as countless red and purple hands burst through!

“W-w-waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

I screamed and Nagisa grabbed my hand while holding the huge cattle cleaver called Namagusa.

Of course, the one caught most off guard was Akehara-san as she tried to grab at Nozaki Haru.

“Ah, wai-…”

She was grabbed, grabbed, grabbed and gouged, gouged, gouged with nails, nails, nails.

“Bhrabgweh!? Dbah!? Ah! Why!? You…bgweah!?”

She tried to grab Nozaki-san, but the most she managed was knocking off the hairpin in the girl’s bangs.

The zombies showed no mercy.

Her hair, her earring, and the stockings covering her slender legs were all ruined. First, the countless hands pulled her to the ground and she vanished among all the flesh. Kamimaki-san could barely move on the tatami mats, so it was obvious what fate awaited him with so many predators here. Neither of them screamed, but that had to be because their windpipes had been torn out. Only the sounds of chewing remained.

Nozaki Haru alone stood in that red and purple hell like a clownfish living symbiotically with a sea anemone. Her bangs hung down toward the thin, thin smile on her face.

I must have looked like I had seen something truly unbelievable.

"You…called these zombies here yourself!?"

"Oh? Is that really so surprising? Akehara-san already did the same thing."

I had no idea what she meant as she stood there holding her cloth pouch.

Unless…

"Think back to when Kamimaki-san was bitten. Just as he tried to open the truck's door, he stopped moving like something had caught and only then was he attacked. And these days, you can lock a vehicle's door without sticking the key in. You only have to press the button on the key."

"You…mean…"

"Someone locked the door in the confusion. Akehara-san was messing with the headless driver's body, so she could easily have found a spare key. I doubt she expected those people with the rifle would attack us, but she probably thought it was her chance."

But that didn't make sense.

If Akehara Ritsu had intentionally gotten Kamimaki-san bitten, why had she acted so worried about stopping the bleeding afterwards? I had a hard time believing that was all an act.

"Think about it the other way around."

"?"

"There were two girls and one guy. Whether in a band or as roommates, that's bound to lead to fights. And it was obvious she had feelings for him. But what if he wasn't interested? And then this incredibly exploitable zombie panic came along. What would she do *if she wanted to make him hers no matter what it took?*"

"…………………………………………………………………………………………… You're…kidding, right?"

That was her motive.

That was her reason for throwing a living human to the zombies.

That was why she had taken the contradictory actions of getting him bitten and then hurrying to stop the bleeding.

She had wanted to create a minimally injured and stable zombie to tame.

“Hee hee. Come to think of it, do you remember what she said when searching for the first-aid kit, Shinobu-chan?” asked Love Monster Nagisa while holding the sword-like cattle cleaver. “She said he was bleeding *more than she expected*. I wonder how much she was planning for.”

Kh…

“This is insane!!”

“Yes, it is. Do you have any idea what it feels like to be stuck between people whose heads are boiling with thoughts of love and romance and to have her constantly calling me a whore or a thief from the back of the store? Kamimaki-san? Who cares about him? Akehara-san? She needed to shut up and stop trying to hide her aging looks behind makeup!! She was like an animal in heat that just won’t shut up! She couldn’t make sense of anything if it didn’t relate to romance, like she lived in some cheap love song! She can live in that tiny world if she wants, but don’t drag me into it!! There are so many more important things in life. This cloth pouch was my dead grandmother’s treasure! And she mocked it day in and day out!! Who does that bitch think she is!?”

Akehara Ritsu had been insane, but what about Nozaki Haru who had punished her?

The people who had blown up the bridge or attacked the dump truck may have been the same. Their frustrations may have been building up little by little and the zombie panic had simply broken the dam in their hearts.

At any rate, only one thing was filling her mind now.

“Your revenge is over. So what are you going to do with us?”

“Who knows.”

She had crossed a line.

The gears had broken, so she tilted her unscathed head with her bangs hanging emptily down among the zombies.

“To be honest, I don’t care about you, but these things will attack and eat you either way. I can’t control them.”

“!? Th-then how did you…!?”

“Hee hee. Do you really think I’d tell you?”

After that rejection, the bloody monsters all turned toward us.

Part 11

I would sometimes watch online rented movies with the Zashiki Warashi. When watching zombie ones, something always seemed strange to me, even if it was crass to point it out.

The zombies of course had no intelligence.

But how did they distinguish living humans from their fellow zombies?

If they couldn't tell, a zombie panic wouldn't last long. If you hid for a while, the zombies would simply devour each other. The zombies, being zombies, wouldn't know how to hide, so they would be the first ones attacked while standing in the middle of the road.

However, that wasn't what happened.

Zombies would surround and devour a single victim, but they never began cannibalizing each other once they gathered.

There had to be something.

They couldn't speak, they couldn't read, and they weren't smart enough to track their prey using footprints and broken twigs. Even so, they would accurately search out people hiding behind cover or survivors lying among a pile of corpses. How did they do it?

Zombies didn't actually exist.

Even a perfect recreation of the "true legends" from Haiti and Voodoo would not create the kind of zombies seen in movies. They were something else entirely.

So my hypothetical could only rely on currently existing creatures.

What had the Zashiki Warashi and I concluded while lying around munching on popcorn and sipping at sodas?

Oh, right.

I remember now.

Part 12

A dull sound rang out.

Just before the countless zombies attacked us like a great wave, I had kicked forward the matching teacups at my feet. They were the ones Nagisa had unconcernedly poured tea into despite the life or death situation.

“Hot!?”

Nozaki covered her face with her hands, but it didn’t matter much with a liquid. It covered most of her head and she shouted more in surprise than anything.

The eyes behind her hanging bangs were burning with rage.

“But what is that supposed to accomplish!? That won’t change any-…!!”

She trailed off.

The white-haired zombies squirming around her were acting odd. They had two obvious targets in Nagisa and me, but they were clearly having trouble deciding who to attack.

Did it work?

“Yeah, hot water wouldn’t change anything. But that stuff was a little different. Although Nagisa didn’t seem to like the flavor of that tannin-rich second flush tea!!”

“It can’t be…”

“*Smell!!* I shouted to answer it all. “*Most animals search for food using their sense of smell!!* You must have checked on it at some point. I don’t know if they consider it a fellow zombie or just not of interest, but it seems they don’t attack any flesh giving off the stench of decomposition!!”

Based on the timing, it had likely been after we reached this thatch-roof house. While we had searched for the first-aid kit, Nozaki Haru had vanished. She had likely had her doubts already and then used the zombies devouring the ambushers as her first and final test.

If people had been living in this home until today, then she would have easily found something rotting in the kitchen garbage.

And if a rotting smell acted as the brakes, then a cigarette smell must have acted as the accelerator. The ashes she had dumped on Akehara-san's head had not just been to provoke her. It was often said babies would swallow cigarettes because of the size and shape, but one theory said it was also a reaction to the stimulant effect.

In the exchange between the bat man and Kamimaki-san, the zombies had gathered around the bat man who had been smoking. Nakisuna had been the very first one attacked and he had been the only person smoking in that no-smoking lobby. It had nothing to do with distance or hostility. The zombies had been drawn by the smell and had set their priority there. They would attack anyone, but they started with the ones giving off the smell of a stimulant like tobacco.

From that very first attack, the theory must have slowly solidified in Nozaki Haru's head.

A closer look at the Kasha-chan ashtray showed it was the one Nakisuna had used.

When Akehara-san had yelled at her before we left the shop, she had changed her shoes too.

But…

"Between the accelerator and the brake, the brake seems to take precedence. Once that smell vanishes, what will happen to you? Conveniently, tea has a deodorizing effect. And the second flush tea Nagisa dislikes has even more tannin than usual. It could easily throw off the perfect balance you'd been keeping!!"

"Ah…ah…"

The zombies all turned toward the center of their group.

They turned toward the closest target of all: Nozaki Haru.

She pulled what looked like a bottle of perfume from her treasured cloth pouch, but it was too late.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Her short, slender body was swallowed up into the center of that crazed scene of red, purple, and muddy white.

Her hands swam through the air like a drowning man grabbing at straw and the perfume bottle fell to the floor and rolled.

If we could only get our hands on that!!

“Nagisa!!”

A gust of wind whipped through the room.

The heavy cattle cleaver named Namagusa fell to the tatami mats. It stabbed into a zombie’s toes and then the bottom of the handle slammed into the zombie’s jaw once it lost its balance. Zombies couldn’t hold their ground well to begin with, so it somersaulted backwards and crashed into the group behind it. Yes, zombies did not cannibalize each other. Nagisa used the time this bought to raise the cattle cleaver as high as she could to use the height difference for a powerful attack, even if it mean leaving her body unguarded. The long tail swayed. I stayed low and ran through the gap in the carnage to grab the perfume bottle from the tatami mats.

I turned around to find Nagisa about to be swallowed up by the zombies.

Even when she decapitated them, the bodies continued walking. The head seemed to be what made the decisions, but the bodies were still in the way. And as she kicked them out of the way, some more fully-functioning zombies had rushed in.

I guess not even Nagisa can push back a dozen or so zombies!!

I didn’t have time to worry about safety measures.

I felt a squeezing in my heart, but I had to act now.

“Dammit!! Catch, Nagisa!!”

I threw the perfume bottle.

I could clearly feel the thread of hope leaving my fingers.

I was also in the middle of the group of white-haired zombies, so I knew exactly what would happen to me without the smell solution that Nozaki Haru had found.

“Come and get me!! I’ll kill every last one of you!!”

I had no actual weapon. I only reached out and grabbed the electric water boiler as I yelled at them. I knew there was no saving me, but I at least wanted to reduce the number of zombies heading Nagisa’s way.

Ha ha. Being an ex-boyfriend is a strange thing.

Our paths could never cross again. We couldn’t go back to being friends. We had no more of a connection than strangers. Even if we could repeat the past, we would never try dating again.

But…

I would still irresponsibly want her to be happy!

Time seemed to stop.

Countless crazed and muddy gazes stabbed into me.

Come on

Come on!

C’mon!!!!!!

Dull sounds rang out through the room.

Part 13

The festering smell of blood filled the depths of my lungs.

I saw reds mixed with blacks and purples.

The violence seemed to encroach on the area beyond death.

I blankly watched the overwhelming scene while collapsed on the floor.

It had arrived so suddenly, and I called its name.

"Zashiki Warashi!?"

A red storm answered me.

She held a branch cutter made from an opening and closing blade attached to the end of a long stainless steel rod. It swung around like a spear as it stabbed into the chests and heads of the zombies, tore through their insides, ripped them apart, and severed the strings of those marionettes. Nagisa had been pretty impressive with the shovel and cattle cleaver, but the Zashiki Warashi took it to the next level.

More importantly…

"…"

One of the zombies bit at her arm, but there was no sign of blood on the Good-for-Nothing Youkai's slender arm. Physical attacks were useless against Youkai. She swung her arm around, smashing the zombie's head open against a nearby column. Dry white hair scattered everywhere.

She had literally superhuman strength and an immortal body that could not be harmed.

She was the natural enemy of zombies.

I don't think that red storm lasted even ten minutes. That was all it took for that seemingly unbeatable swarm of zombies to collapse to the floor and stop moving.

"That should about do it," said the Zashiki Warashi with the branch cutter resting on her shoulder.

I didn't understand.

"How did…you get here?"

"I walked. Even if it's across the mountain, this is only the next town over."

"Not that! How did you find out about the zombie panic? And even if you knew about that, how did you know we were in this house!?"

"Who was it that changed history to give me back my power during the Aoandon incident? With the power of the Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi, I can easily sense my family's danger and remove that danger. I may not like it, but a Zashiki Warashi protects the good fortune of her family."

"A-are you saying you never got involved in the past incidents because *your gears as a Zashiki Warashi were broken*?"

"Shinobu, is there any point in discussing an alternate timeline? Although to be honest, that way was a lot easier for me."

She really did sound annoyed, but I finally managed to breathe a sigh of relief.

I grabbed the cloth pouch from the floor. Nozaki had called her grandmother's treasure. She had let go of it, so it had fortunately not been stained with blood.

The zombies were dangerous and I wanted to get out of this city as soon as possible, but the winds were changing. I had Nagisa and her cattle cleaver (even if she was difficult to deal with) and I had the Zashiki Warashi who might as well have all the cheat codes activated. This was like being given a flamethrower and Gatling gun with infinite ammo in a zombie movie where you had done nothing but be chased the entire time. Or maybe it was more like summoning a demon from a grimoire after only having a knife and handgun to fight the swarm of zombies.

It was possible we could actually keep moving forward while sweeping all the zombies out of the way.

"Nagisa, are you okay? You weren't hurt just now, were you?"

In the instant I looked away from the Zashiki Warashi to speak to Nagisa, it hit me.

Not even I knew why the thought came to me.

But…

We had no idea what turned people into zombies. We only had a vague idea that people who were bitten or killed became a zombie.

This seemed to involve the Kasha, which was said to steal or move the corpses of sinners so they would vanish from their funeral or grave. I couldn’t remember the exact rules, though.

But what if the rules were focused on moving the dead? What if the important factor was being dead and not being bitten by the zombies?

What kind of Youkai was a Zashiki Warashi again?

She was a collection of the babies killed by their parents during famines and the like.

In that case, she counted as being “dead” from the beginning.

What if that created a security hole that matched the conditions for being controlled by the Kasha without being bitten by a zombie?

“Zashiki…Warashi…?”

I could not turn around.

I could not look back.

If that was the case, this could not be worse. It would be the worst of the worst case scenarios! The human zombies were more than enough of a threat, so all was lost if a zombie was made out of something that was immune to blades and bullets and could freely control human destiny in the form of good and bad fortune. There would be nothing we could do. She would become the worst and greatest monster of them all!

So I begged for it to not be true.

I begged that I was worrying over nothing.

I seemed to be praying to god as I begged so very, very, very hard in my heart, but then a sweet-smelling breath blew into my ear.

A moment later, I heard something.

It sounded like the growling of a large beast.

Chapter 2: Another Interrogation in the Cell by Uchimaku Hayabusa

Part 1

After I climbed aboard the rental car I had reserved at the local airport and drove out below the leaden sky, it began to snow a little. The road wasn't hidden in white yet and it was more like a clear sherbet, but I still began to worry whether I would find tire chains in one of those evenly-equipped rental cars that might as well have come prepackaged. I was glad it had started with studless winter tires, but I'd failed to check on the chains.

"Sigh… More importantly, the quick switch from cold to warm has left Santa Enbi-chan needing to use the restroom. Ahh, I'm fidgeting around here."

"Why are you even here?"

"Why? Because a certain detective decided to pick up the middle school girl he found throwing kisses on the side of the road. Oh, how aggressive☆"

"Seeing you dressed like that in public is enough to take you into custody for your own safety!! Besides, it's snowing outside, so why are you wearing a miniskirt bikini Santa outfit!? Are you trying to get yourself killed!? Are you one of those surfer Santas in the southern hemisphere!?"

"Oh, c'mon. When I make it that obvious, all of the guys who might try hitting on me decide it's a trap and won't get close. That screens out everyone dangerous, so only the good-hearted people like you would try to talk to me."

The Mystery Freak had zero sense of danger despite wearing a hybrid Santa hat and reindeer scarf cap that looked like extra-long droopy ears hanging from her head.

If I hadn't been driving along a dangerous snowy road at 40 kph, I would have covered my face with my hands. I was eternally grateful to the Life Safety Division that dealt with things like this year-round.

"Don't give me that. I chose this Santa outfit for you, you know? I worked hard covering my body in an insulating gel, so how about rewarding me a little?"

"What? For me?"

"Well, when I saw the entry shining at the top of your home computer's search history…"

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Cough, cough! Ahem!!"

I impulsively slammed on the brakes and the back wheels nearly slid to the side. I used the steering wheel to regain control and glared over at the demon in the passenger seat.

"I-impossible… I had that set to safely and securely erase all of that extra data stored who-knows-where whenever I close the browser!"

"If you thought that would erase every last trace, you really are computer illiterate, detective. Don't underestimate this age of immoral big data corporations."

Not that it really mattered. I was an adult, so I could enjoy some adult entertainment no matter what anyone said! But if I had to say whether this made me want to die or not, I would say it did! A good bit actually!!

"Anyway, the real problem is you. Surely you aren't relying on the superstition that rural areas are safer than the big cities."

"Of course not. Whether impulsive or planned, crimes happen when people fail to let off some steam and something goes wrong in their heart. In that sense, a rural city with little entertainment and long distances between facilities is like a treasure trove of unexploded ordnance."

"Then why were you standing on the side of the road half naked… no, three-quarters naked?"

"Because I knew you would protect me, of course."

I couldn't help but give a heavy sigh.

"You really need to be careful. Gangs of robbers that dig tunnels to bank vaults are pretty common recently. They've been attacking mostly these rural banks."

"And a lot of travelers have gone missing in Bozen City where we're headed?"

"…"

"It's pretty amazing. When the Metropolitan Police Department's case record storage was being moved, they found a whole bunch of completely untouched and forgotten-about cases. C'mon, this isn't the same as a part-time delivery boy hiding all the New Year's cards in a locker because he doesn't want to deal with delivering them all."

I was curious how she knew about that, but I couldn't say anything since it was internal information.

Meanwhile, she continued the conversation on her own.

"No matter how efficient the system, it's still being run by humans. Although I do find it interesting that they were all found now. It's almost like some kind of dam burst, don't you think?"

That was also why a Metropolitan Police Department detective, who was meant to protect Tokyo, was driving a rental car out in this rural area. My jurisdiction was the city of Tokyo, but I still had to head out to check on things if one of the city's residents was involved in something outside the prefecture. I was wearing a cardigan instead of my usual suit because I didn't want to waltz in there like I was lording it over them as a representative of the Metropolitan Police Department. It would be a problem if the tabloids got wind of the fact that we were re-investigating cases because of improperly handled paperwork.

"Are you sure you'll be okay, detective?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"These new revelations show that more than thirty people have gone missing. And it was all over a decade ago. People are generally declared missing and presumed dead at seven years. That's a pretty severe legal line, and we're only talking about the people who went missing when visiting Bozen City from Tokyo. If you checked through all the case records of all the police stations in Japan, you might find way, waaaaay more missing people."

She had finally moved enough away from the actual case that I could talk about it. It was possible she was keeping that distance on purpose, though.

"I would have no way of knowing about that. But whether it's ten people or a hundred people, if there was a crime committed, we just have to arrest the criminal and ask them about it."

"That's true, but isn't it too risky to go charging into some dark den before you know how big the enemy is?"

"I'm not doing this alone."

"Oh? Are you finally accepting my help?"

"The local police will be doing the investigation and I will only be a pipeline back to the Metropolitan Police Department in Tokyo, Miss Protective Custody!!"

We continued arguing as the rental car crossed a metal bridge and entered Bozen City. I planned to stay at my family home in the neighboring Noukotsu Village, but my work came first. I would head to the local police department with my luggage still in the trunk. I would also leave that Mystery Moron with them while I was there.

Or that was the plan at least.

"Hey, detective, look at that mall."

"What? You mentioned having to use the restroom before. Is that it?"

"Well, that is an issue, but look." She pointed out the window. "Doesn't the parking lot seem odd? There's a *burned-out car* in it."

"What!?"

I quickly looked over and did indeed see it. As a rural city, the parking lot was needlessly large and a station wagon sat in one corner, burned down to only the chassis and frame. It was scorched black, so I couldn't tell what color it had originally been.

I made a rapid change of plans, turned into the parking lot, and parked a short distance from the car in question. I opened the door and stepped out to find the winter wind seeming to cut into my cheeks.

The Mystery Freak got out too and she groaned while turning her toes inward. The smartphone swayed from her waist in a present-style case.

"O-ohhhhh…. Th-the temperature difference… D-detective, can you handle this? I need to visit the little girls' room."

"Just go."

Santa Enbi left and I approached the burned vehicle.

There was no sign of the local police and it was not cordoned off with yellow tape. There wasn't any sign of any kind of investigation. How long had it been like this? To borrow the Mystery Freak's words, this wasn't some part-time delivery boy who didn't want to deal with delivering all the New Year's cards.

I peered inside to the driver's seat to make sure no one was inside and then I pulled out my cellphone.

But…

"No signal?" I muttered while staring at the symbol on the edge of the small screen.

Even if we were in the mountains, this was a flat urban area. And I remembered my cellphone working just fine here when I visited for fun before moving to Tokyo. The effective area of the cellphone towers would expand, but I wouldn't think it would shrink.

Regardless, I couldn't make a call.

The mall would probably have some pay phones inside, so I decided to contact the local police that way.

I walked through the clear sherbet snow to cut across the parking lot.

That may have been why I initially mistook the source of the crunching sound below my feet.

"…?"

Confused, I looked to my feet and saw sharp red and yellow plastic shards mixed in with the snow. And not just a few; there were tons. I looked further into the distance and noticed what looked like a side mirror lying on the ground. One of the parking lot's streetlight poles was dented and a car's paint was scraped across it. There were also a lot of tire tracks.

What?

It almost looked like all the cars in the parking lot had started moving at once while running into each other. Either that or people had fought fiercely over all of the parked cars.

“Detectiiive!”

Miniskirt Bikini Santa Enbi waved at me from the mall entrance while rubbing her scarf cap for warmth.

I caught glimpses of the problem before reaching her.

The glass doors were all broken and the entire area had become a sea of glass shards. A sign made to look like the local Kasha-chan mascot lay on the ground in two pieces.

“What is all this?”

“I checked around on the way to the bathroom, but it’s pretty bad inside,” she said while pulling a magnifying glass from the bag at her waist.

I stepped inside and found no customers, workers, or anyone at all. The gentle lights and warm heater were still on, but the recorded female voice calmly repeating sales information sounded all the colder because of it.

And…

“Shelves have been knocked over all through here.”

“There’s also dark red liquid splattered around. I haven’t done a detailed investigation, but unless someone used paint or chicken blood to fake it, I think we know what it is.”

Had there been a riot here?

But none of the equipment around the registers looked broken. Foodstuffs were strewn across the floor and some clearly had bites taken out of them, but it didn’t look like anyone had gone for the valuable items.

“This isn’t good. …I thought I would only be checking some documents, so I didn’t bring my handgun.”

I only had my police badge, cellphone, memo pad, and stainless steel ballpoint pen. That wasn’t going to be much help against a group of enraged rioters.

I then noticed an A4 piece of copy paper taped to a shelf in the fresh foods section.

It said the following:

“Dear, San-chan. This is your mother. I’m safe. I will stop by here again at the same time tomorrow. If you’re hiding somewhere, write where on here.”

“…What is this?”

“The ink is fresh and it smells like solvent. …But since it says she’ll be back tomorrow, she must assume this paper will still be here then.”

The Mystery Freak shook the reindeer horns on her head and sniffed at the paper.

However, I already knew that. And of course, a worker would normally remove something like this.

Had they decided there wouldn’t be any workers here to remove it?

And what was that about “I’m safe” and “hiding somewhere”? Were they in a situation where they had to hide or their safety wasn’t guaranteed?

“Detective.”

“Anyway, we need a phone. If we can’t use our cellphones, we need to find a public one.”

I slowly walked around the large building.

There were notes left here and there, but the most distinctive were in the do-it-yourself section.

“Using gasoline as-is is dangerous. You can stabilize it by mixing it with a metal soap, a synthetic detergent, and sand. However, the gasoline itself is highly volatile. Make sure you don’t breathe any in during your work.”

“Choosing an axe or machete is fine, but a towel and whetstone is what really matters. Blood is one thing, but you’ll be in trouble if the fat gets stuck on the blade. You’ll definitely live longer if you learn how to maintain your blades.”

“Don’t worry. Humans won’t lose to the likes of them.”

The contents grew more and more ominous.

Not just the text, but the paper itself was often crumpled up or splattered with some kind of dark red stain.

I could tell that the people who visited this mall and either left or read the notes were very afraid of something.

But who was the real threat?

If I took these notes at face value, the “frightened people” were wandering around with Molotov cocktails, axes, and machetes. And the handwriting of the notes was all different, so it was obvious enough people to start a riot were going along with this.

In our search for a pay phone, the Mystery Freak and I climbed a gently curving staircase.

When I looked out the window and to the lead-colored city, I found the biggest shock of all.

“What…the hell?”

“That doesn’t look like just a fire.”

Dark smoke was rising from the entire cityscape visible out that elevated window. We would have needed binoculars to find any details, but a lot of cars were crashed and abandoned on the roads. They didn’t seem to have just slid on the snow. Instead of a single stain at one point in the city, the entire city was covered in stains.

The strangest part of all was the lack of flashing red lights and loud sirens despite the great commotion.

There was no sign at all of any emergency vehicles such as ambulances, fire trucks, or police cars.

What had happened in Bozen City?

In fact, was it even functioning as a city anymore?

Something was wrong when old laws against rioting were coming to mind. It had to be a joke for that to be showing itself in the modern age of Intellectual Villages.

“Hey, Mystery Freak. Let’s head back to the car. Something’s wrong. I thought we could solve this with some support from the police station, but this may be beyond that. It would be better to call for help from beyond the framework of this city. …Dammit, what am I even thinking? Am I worried that *the police station might not be safe anymore*!?”

With that, I turned back her way, but then a heavy metallic blow struck the bridge of my nose.

Before I could think anything more, my mind was dragged into deep darkness.

Part 2

I felt my body shaking.

I felt a pain in my back and only then did I realize I was coming to.

As soon as I did, my nose started aching.

“Did you wake up?”

The soft voice of a teenage girl spoke from quite nearby, but it was not the Mystery Freak. I twisted my body and found my thumbs were bound behind my back. It felt like a zip tie. The Mystery Freak was lying next to me in her insane outfit, but she seemed to still be unconscious.

I turned my head around from the floor and finally grasped the general situation.

We seemed to be on the back of a light truck.

I didn’t know who was driving and a girl of about high school age was sitting in one corner of the truck bed.

She had fluffy chestnut hair.

The oozing gleam in her eyes did not suit her pretty face in the slightest.

She wore a pink knit dress and a white cardigan with a hat held on by pins and a tail-like accessory attached to the back of her waist. It looked more like a costume than normal fashion.

The strangest part of all was the long bloody cattle cleaver she held in her arms like a small child holding a precious trumpet. The name on the base seemed to be Namagusa. My eyes had naturally tried to search out any way of identifying the murder weapon.

“Are you…Nagisa-chan?”

“Eh heh heh. Long time no see, Shinobu-chan’s uncle. First impressions are important, aren’t they?”

She readily greeted me and I might have smiled back at her had we been sitting at a café table. However, that only made her seem stranger here. This was Shinobu's classmate, but was this situation a part of normal life for her now?

I recalled hearing some things about Nagisa-chan when I spoke to Shinobu on the phone.

Something about her having changed and being one of the world's three greatest yandere.

I had moved to Tokyo before they had entered middle school and I had assumed he was exaggerating, but was it true?

"What did you do? No…what happened?"

"Good boy. You're so clever. I assumed you would decide *I* caused all this and try to struggle. Maybe I didn't even need to restrain you."

She giggled while nestling up against the blade coated in dark red blood and hair.

"What we've done is…well, protect you. Yes, I'm glad you're obedient. And of course, we're not just volunteering. You'll have to give something back. We don't have time to fight amongst ourselves right now."

"Protect us? From what?"

The notes in the mall and the signs of people stocking up on food and weapons had told me they were afraid of something. It hadn't looked like they were gathering the weaponry they needed to attack a bank or jewelry store and steal the valuables.

Defense, not offense.

Protection, not invasion.

Retreat, not advance.

But what were the people of Bozen City so afraid of?

Nagisa-chan turned her dark eyes my way and the answer to my question slipped from the corner of her lips.

"Zombies."

……

I may have been mistaken to think I was speaking with a human being who could speak human language.

I clearly wasn't communicating properly with Nagisa-chan here.

I mean…zombies?

What was she talking about? This was complete nonsense!

Part of me was relieved I hadn't been carrying my handgun. Letting Nagisa-chan steal my gun here would have been a catastrophic failure.

"Well, that's what we're calling them anyway, but that might not actually be what they are. I doubt they have anything to do with the original Voodoo ones and they don't seem to come from an infectious disease like the ones in movies and dramas. Shinobu-chan said they're related to a Youkai called a Kasha, though."

"…Shinobu?"

I still managed to pick up on at least one term I was familiar with.

It was like spotting a short readable string in an otherwise corrupted file.

"Is Shinobu with you!? Please tell me he's okay…!!"

I trailed off due to a deafening metallic sound.

Nagisa-chan was banging the tip of her cattle cleaver against the bottom of the light truck's bed.

She stared at me as she spoke.

"Could you not mention Shinobu-chan right now? I beg you."

This…isn't good.

Nervous sweat poured from my body despite the cold winter air. My only weapon was a pen and my hands were bound, so angering Nagisa-chan and her large blade would be a poor decision. I wouldn't stand a chance and the damage could easily spread to the Mystery Freak too.

The situation gradually dawned on me. We were in the back of a light truck, so she at least had a driver with her. That meant this madness wasn't hers alone.

"Oh, right. I forgot."

She clapped her hands together in front of her face and began casually rummaging through the bag next to her. She didn't seem to care that my heart was being squeezed by fear and anxiety. She pulled out a can of deodorant spray that used something called silver ion and she held it out toward me in one hand.

My throat dried up and she sprayed it at me.

"Yes, don't move. Good boy. The zombies search for their prey by smell like dogs and hyenas. …Well, just think of it as a placebo or a good luck charm."

"…"

"Since they use smell, an airtight vehicle would be better than this truck bed, but we can't have everything. And the risk of being attacked while driving around is pretty low. …If we stopped in the middle of the street, we would need to be prepared to die, though."

I remained silent and she moved on to spraying the deodorant over the Mystery Freak who was had yet to move.

Once she was finally done with her task, she stared into the distance.

"The city is already filled with zombies. In fact, there's no real reason for them to be restricted to the city. If you had continued wandering around like that, you would've been in trouble. A lot of trouble. If we hadn't saved you, you probably would've been devoured."

"It's dangerous inside and outside the city? Then where are you taking us?"

"Good boy. You actually think things through. …We're on the way to a safe hideout, of course."

The city was a mess. Roadside trees were broken, more windows were shattered than not, and cars were on fire here and there. A torn Kasha-chan costume was scattered along the road and a banner for a winter festival was swaying weakly in the wind. But despite all that, the city was dead. There was no sign of anyone there. Lived-in homes had a different atmosphere than abandoned homes and a school had a different atmosphere during the day than at night. In the same way, the entire city felt like a hospital in the dead of night.

“Everyone’s hiding,” said Nagisa-chan. “Both the survivors and the zombies.”

Our light truck left the city and started up a mountain road. Leaving human civilization only made me more nervous. It drove home that we had been abducted. We passed through an arch of dry winter trees, left the road, and entered something like a hand-dug tunnel.

“This seems to be a portion of Mikuchi-sama.”

“Mikuchi-sama?”

“Yes. There are caves all through the mountain like an ant colony. That’s where the zombies had to have come from originally. But now that the bridge has been destroyed, they make for a convenient side road.”

I had heard of this before.

Oh, right. I remember.

I had heard that name at a festival in Bozen City back when I was in school. The winter festival celebrated the Kasha while the summer festival celebrated Mikuchi-sama.

But wait. Weren’t the roots of that legend not exactly pleasant? The sinners were…um, what was it?

Unlike a maintained tunnel, there were no lights, so the truck rattled onward with only the headlights to combat the pitch black darkness. The steep slope made it clear we were ascending the mountain.

We finally left the cave and a small village buried in the trees came into view.

Each of the homes was quite large and there were also a bank, a real estate building, and other out-of-place facilities. It may have been the wealthy area. It was possible there had been a system where higher up the mountain indicated a higher social status. I had only used the city for shopping and festivals when I was in school, so I didn't know too much about the local way of doing things.

The light truck drove to one building in particular.

"The bank?"

"We considered the school or hospital, but there's nothing we could do with all those windows."

Nagisa-chan discussed her zombie delusion like it was a story of hardship.

"We jumped for joy when we checked the map and saw a geothermal power station far off the mountain road, but we got there to find it was far too small and the walls were far too thin. More importantly, it was directly connected to a Mikuchi-sama tunnel, so it was full of zombies. There was nothing we could do."

"…"

"Yes. Good boy. You've caught on, haven't you? The bank has the fewest entrances and is easily defended."

This was the city next to my hometown, but I had never been to its bank.

However, it looked like there was a connection after all.

Near the entrance was a diamond shape with the bottom missing and doubled at the top.

That was the Hishigami crest.

It didn't look like a megabank, so it may have been bought in order to support their funding.

However, it was not exactly unharmed. The metal shutter was bent up diagonally and a portion of the wall had crumbled. It looked like a building left after a bombing in a war film. The talk of zombies was preposterous, but how had humans pulled this off?

A microbus that could hold about twenty people was parked in the parking lot, but would it really run? All of the windows were broken and concerning stains were splattered here and there. From what I could see, most of the seats had their stuffing coming out and some of the tires may have blown because the entire bus was tilting diagonally.

The light truck stopped in the parking lot and Nagisa-chan slowly stood up with her knife in one hand. A great pressure weighed on my stomach, but she only gently shook the Mystery Freak's shoulder. Miniskirt Bikini Santa Enbi groaned and slowly opened her eyes.

"Come with me. Yes. Good girl."

"…"

We could not disobey her. With our hands bound behind our backs, we couldn't fight back with a weapon or even run away. After all, humans used their arms to balance. Also, our opponents were Nagisa-chan with her sword-like cattle cleaver named Namagusa and the driver who had the truck. We would definitely be killed if we tried to run away on this empty mountain road.

Even if she was an extreme exception in many ways, the Mystery Freak was still a civilian.

I had to avoid any option that would bring her harm.

The two of us got down from the truck and someone stepped out from the truck's driver and passenger seat.

The driver was a man with graying hair and the passenger was a young woman.

"Allow me to introduce you. Meeting everyone makes you nervous, doesn't it? …This old man is Sada Shirabe-san. He's a doctor if you can believe it. That's really helped us out."

The man gave a quiet snort and seemed to be a middle-aged man in his late forties…or maybe even approaching elderly. He wore a sweater, slacks, and a white coat, but he didn't seem to be the type to worry about appearances. His hair was a mix of black and gray and his sweater's collar was twisted. The bottom of his white coat and pants were splattered with mud and his glasses looked like he didn't care about anything other than the prescription being right.

"And this is Amou Neko-san. She's a firefighter. …Although she's using those skills to make Molotov cocktails and to teach us how to kick down doors or escape out of high windows. Yes, good girl. Here's a caramel for staying so still."

The woman looked barely in her twenties. She was probably younger than me. Her fluffy hair was tied back with a hair tie and she had a healthy and well-proportioned body. But that wasn't all. She definitely had supple muscles below that layer of feminine fat. She may have chosen her clothing with mobility in mind because she wore a bright yellow sports brand track suit, but unlike Doctor Sada, she did not appear sloppy or filthy. That may have been the difference between simply not caring and putting in the bare minimum effort to be fashionable. An oil lighter hung from a thin chain around her neck and she wore a lot of shoulder bags and waist pouches, but did that have anything to do with Nagisa-chan's introduction of the woman?

Anyway, there were only three here. How many more were there inside the bank?

"(Hey, detective. I only just woke up, so what's going on here?)"

"(I'll explain later. Just keep in mind that resisting without preparing first won't end well.)"

"H-hurry inside! I don't want to stay out here longer than I have to."

"Well, we don't have to worry about the zombies once we get inside the barricade's 'puzzle ring'. It's lucky they aren't very smart."

I couldn't tell what cost they had paid to gain this sense of peace. It was like seeing a transaction in a foreign country's currency.

We entered through the metal door in the back rather than through the front.

Immediately inside was a wall of trash crammed in between the benches and tables stacked up to the ceiling. There was a stairway to the second floor to the side, but Nagisa-chan and the others crouched down and crawled through a gap in the trash wall.

"The zombies aren't smart enough for this."

When I followed Nagisa-chan through, I could just about see the panties on the hips sticking out from her knit dress.

"Even if they see us or detect our scent, they always choose the easiest route and follow the wall. They view the barricade as a wall and make their way up the stairs to the second floor. Following the wall takes them down another staircase and then outside. They wander around and around and around without ever reaching our living space."

"And since zombies follow the smell, we use the ducts to carry the scents of our living space to the second floor," explained Sada. "It seems to have originally been a countermeasure against gas weapons, so the equipment is quite powerful. Balling up a curtain and sticking it inside changed the flow of air, so the air meant to go outside now goes to the second floor. Then when they're drawn here by our smell, they end up walking around in a loop until they lose interest."

"A-and if they do break into the first floor, we have a last resort," added Amou. "We can blast through the wall for an emergency escape route straight to the truck."

They sounded proud…but how much of that was serious?

That part about blasting through the wall wasn't referencing explosives, was it?

It may have been a habit to help calm her, but I was really worried by the way Amou was clicking her oil lighter's cover open and closed.

We entered a large floor and the fluorescent lights were on even during the day. Some of the windows and shutters were broken, but they were covered with walls of trash and large mirrors that may have been taken from the bathrooms were set up in front of them. I wasn't quite sure what effect they would have when looking in from outside.

"About a third of the damage to the bank was done by us. …Then we piled up the rubble and set up the mirrors so it *looks like* you can see everything inside when you peek in through the gaps. But in reality, you can't see into or get into any of our living space from outside."

"It's more like a box of mirrors than a magic trick," added Sada as he poked at the temple of his glasses.

Nagisa-chan nodded.

"Trying to hold back the zombies is no use. Preparing a large closed room only draws their interest. That was obvious when we saw the town hall and other areas that suffered a concentrated attack. In fact, when they bite people, it seems to be a way of investigating it more than eating it. It’s just like how a baby puts everything in its mouth, but they happen to have such ridiculous strength that it can kill you. It’s probably the same when they chase after and bite at fleeing people. The more you resist, the more you interest them. Keep that in mind. I’ll give you a caramel and call you a good boy or girl.”

“…”

“So it’s more effective to redirect them than to hold them back. You need to let them work off some of their curiosity. In that way, the bank’s limited windows and doors let us set up a route more easily. We can let them walk freely through while never actually running across our living space. It’s like creating a piece of trick art.”

Nagisa-chan stretched with knife in hand while she stood in the center of the large space.

A few things came to mind as I listened to her.

“(Detective.)”

“(That sounds a lot like a fishing method that takes advantage of the fish behavior. You create spiraling wall of nets because the fish will naturally move along the wall and end up trapped in the center.)”

Apparently the zombies were just as unintelligent as fish.

It was exactly the kind of idea I would expect from an Intellectual Village resident. She may have had a habit of playing in the rivers like I had.

Then the doctor named Sada spoke up.

“Can I go now?”

“Yes.”

“M-me too… My weapons are one-use, so I need to resupply.”

“Make those Molotov cocktails for us.”

Society was working under a bizarre set of values, the jobs were split up, and the people scattered. They opened nearby doors and entered their own spaces. The Mystery Freak and I glanced around, but Nagisa-chan tapped at the floor with her large cattle cleaver and spoke to us.

“You two are going in here. Go, go.”

“Where are you taking us? Are you going to keep our hands bound?”

“You’ll understand soon enough.”

She took us to a thick circular door behind the bank’s counter. It truly was about a meter thick and had more than twenty fixed bolts.

The Hishigami crest was carved into the center of the mass of metal.

The bank…vault!?

“Wait. You don’t have to close us in there, do you? Didn’t you say you were protecting us!? But this is like a prison cell!”

“We have to. The truth is, we picked up some people around town before. We used that microbus out front.”

“What does that have to do with this!?”

“I won’t tell you if you don’t quiet down. I would be teaching you that works. …They would have been safe inside the bank. The zombies can’t get through the ‘puzzle ring’ that requires some intelligence, so they end up going to the second floor and leaving through the other entrance. But those people wouldn’t listen and were too slow, so the zombies attacked before we could take them to safety. The rest was awful. Those of us away from the bus had to escape into the bank, but those on the bus had nowhere to run and no way to fight.”

That was through the insane filter that Nagisa-chan used to view the world, so what had actually happened?

At the very least, it looked like the bus was broken and abandoned. But how many people had been aboard? Had anyone even been aboard?

“So we’ll protect any survivors and we’ll give them food. If necessary, we’ll give them weapons and fight the zombies with them. But they don't get any freedom. You should thank us for giving you a safe place to sleep. Once you learn that this is the safest place for you, I'll call you a good boy and good girl."

She pushed on our shoulders to throw us into a stifling closed space.

The vault was surprisingly spacious. It was lit by orange lights like a tunnel and it was the size of two classrooms. Instead of a single space, it was divided into sections by metal bars. One contained cash piled up in a block, one contained gold bars similarly piled up, one contained safe deposit boxes that resembled coin lockers, and one probably contained bonds. While the entire area was spacious, each individual section was not. The smallest of them were smaller than a city hotel room.

Nagisa-chan smiled thinly.

"I'll let you decide. Do you want to be together or separated?"

"Together," immediately replied the Mystery Freak.

Nagisa-chan grabbed Enbi's arm and threw her into a section with drawers along the wall. She then did the same with me. The following creaking sound seemed to pierce into my heart. I could hear the clicking of the door locking.

"Turn around and stick your hands out toward me. I'll cut the zip ties on your thumbs."

"…"

"Good boy. Good girl. Have a caramel."

We could only do as we were told.

Our arms were freed, but we did not feel at all liberated.

We were literally behind bars. Nagisa-chan held the key and her footsteps moved away and toward the vault's exit. I had trouble breathing, but without realizing that, she slowly looked back as she made her way to the free world outside.

"See you two later. I said it's better to redirect the zombies, but that changes with walls this thick. You might be interested in what's going on outside, but creating some new boundaries is best for us all. Hee hee."

I heard a mechanical rumbling and the meter-thick circular door slowly and smoothly moved.

That seal bearing the Hishigami crest was closing.

The freedom I had taken for granted and the right to walk wherever I wanted to go were being taken from me. I knew that, but there was nothing I could do.

It took a full thirty seconds for the door to fully close.

The vault was shut.

If the Mystery Freak hadn't been next to me, I'm pretty sure I would have screamed.

Part 3

There wasn't much we could do, but we couldn't just sit around in silence either.

The Hishigami crest door had closed, but that also meant Nagisa-chan and the others weren't monitoring us anymore. The Mystery Freak and I immediately exchanged a glance inside those metal bars. We pulled our cellphone and smartphone from our pockets. Neither one had a signal of course, but they had other uses.

"How much have you done!?"

"I've been secretly filming everything since I woke up, so I should have everything about the inside of the bank. But I obviously have nothing from when I was asleep. Detective, what's going on?"

"I used my cellphone to record my conversation with Nagisa-chan on the light truck. You listen to that first. Let's share our information."

We had no idea how long we would be imprisoned. That was a frightening thought, but we had to plan for the worst and thus could not waste our phones' batteries.

"How much battery do you have left?"

"It's nearly full, but that won't last too long since it's a smartphone. I do have a giant rapid charger, so we shouldn't have any trouble for the time being. What about you?"

"I have a charging cable, but there's no outlet in here. There's only so long it'll last even if we're economical. We should assume we won't be able to use the phones for long and check through all the data while we can."

"Can do, detective."

The Mystery Freak focused on the recorded voices coming from my cellphone. She must have been cold because she wrapped her arms around her shoulders, rubbed her legs together, and pressed the drooping ears of her scarf cap against her cheeks.

I slowly exhaled, leaned back against the metal bars, and mussed up my bangs with one hand.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“For what? For not telling Enbi-chan how pretty she is in her Santa costume?”

“For putting you in danger. I had little choice given the situation and I don’t know how many people they have, but this is no place to bring a minor girl.”

“Are you saying you should have pleaded with the insane kidnappers to ‘take me, but save this girl’? Drawing attention to me would only put me in more danger. They might have started by holding me down and tearing my clothes off for some dark entertainment and harassment.”

“…”

“There was no way of taking zero damage here. It’s unfortunate, but that’s reality. In that case, you chose the best option available to you. At the very least, I’m safe now because you protected me while I was passed out and defenseless, right?”

“But I’m a police officer.”

“That means nothing. I’m mature enough to know the police are human too. You’re not some macho man in full-body tights, so don’t worry about it.”

Eventually, Enbi finished listening to my recorded conversation with Nagisa-chan.

She sighed and opened her mouth.

“She’s treating us like pets.”

“You thought so too?”

“It’s the method for dogs, cats, and a few other small animals. I have an e-book on it on my smartphone if you want to see.”

“No, thanks… She always praises us as a ‘good boy’ or ‘good girl’, she gives us a caramel as a special treat, and she bangs that cattle cleaver for an unpleasant noise. It’s the standard division of reward and punishment. That much I get.”

That was a problem in and of itself, but the root problem lay elsewhere.

“That aside, what’s this about a zombie panic?”

“I don’t know how things turned out like this.”

At the very least, we hadn’t seen any corpses getting up and we hadn’t been attacked by any groups of rotting flesh. It was definitely odd for the city to be so unnaturally quiet and for not a single firetruck to be in evidence with smoke rising everywhere, but that was a different issue.

Which meant…

“They may truly believe that there are zombies out there.”

“But *we don’t know if those zombies are really there nor not*?”

Yes.

In fact, that was the only reasonable answer.

Before assuming some strange occult technique had placed evil spirits inside corpses or that a mysterious pathogen was causing the dead to rise, it was much more natural to assume this was a case of mass hysteria causing the people of Bozen City to believe there were zombies everywhere.

The city had been destroyed, but had a swarm of zombies really done that?

Wasn’t it easier to think that destruction was the result of crowds wielding handmade weapons against imaginary zombies?

They may not have accurate recollections of the incident they had caused.

“But have you noticed?” I asked. “Even if that’s true, this mass hysteria had to have spread in an extremely short period of time.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The fresh foods in the mall hadn’t rotted. And if an entire city was crippled by riots, the information would have gotten out. This happened too fast for that. We should probably assume only a few hours have passed.”

“What if some mysterious government agency is suppressing the information?”

“That’s a ridiculous conspiracy theory, but I guess I’ll give a serious rebuttal. If that were the case, how did we get inside Bozen City so easily? If they were hiding this, wouldn’t they cut off the flow of people?”

“True. That’s unlikely unless this was some kind of accident *that surprised even the government enough that they were slow to seal everything off*.”

There were no zombies.

If we could get them to realize that, they would free us from this prison. After all, they would lose their pretext for “protecting” us. But how far would that “minority view” get us in this city where common sense had crumbled away?

“There was a case like this at a so-called UFO Village in America. The villagers were terrified of an alien invasion, so when they took a liking to a traveler, they would shove them in a shelter in order to ‘protect’ them.”

“And what happened to a traveler that upset the villagers?”

“The villagers concluded the traveler was actually an alien wearing human skin. After that…well, it was case by case. Some were given public executions and others were dissected for future reference. In fact, anyone who broke the village’s rules or a leader who lost in a conflict between factions would end up considered an alien.”

It made my head hurt.

If someone feared the destruction of mankind, they also believed in that destruction. They hated to have that destruction denied. They wished to be freed from those bonds, but they also wanted to be bound by them more than anyone else. With Nagisa-chan and the others fighting the zombie threat, insisting there were no zombies could be dangerous. I certainly didn’t want them deciding we were zombies pretending to be human. I was also bothered by their little society they had set up. The rules of back alleys and prisons were symbols of fear, but they were rewarding when you were at the top. They may have been building up their own unique rules like that.

But anyway…

"I've shared my information, so let me see the footage on your smartphone now."

We hadn't just swapped our phones, but that was because of the batteries. Watching it together was more economical than both of us viewing it separately. I borrowed the smartphone inside a case modeled after a Santa-like present.

We pressed our chilly shoulders together to watch the small screen.

The footage shook a lot, but that wasn't surprising since it was filmed while hanging from the waist of her swimsuit. I felt like I would get motion sickness if I stared at it for too long, but I couldn't let that get to me.

It started with us getting out of the truck and approaching the somewhat snow-covered exterior of the bank. The shutters and wall had apparently been intentionally destroyed, but it would have required explosives or heavy machinery. There was one other thing to focus on.

"I'm interested in that destroyed microbus."

"According to Nagisa-chan, they tried to carry survivors to the bank using it, but that ended in failure when it was attacked by zombies while trying to get the people inside the bank."

"I wonder how many people are in their group. It didn't look like there was anyone other than those three in the bank."

"It's hard to tell how much of what they say is true."

The footage entered the thick metal door out back, passed below the trash wall, and entered the bank.

Nagisa-chan, Sada Shirabe the doctor, and Amou Neko the firefighter spoke inside the lobby.

"Can I go now?"

"Yes."

"M-me too… My weapons are one-use, so I need to resupply."

"Stop there."

The Mystery Freak reached in and stopped the video.

"Did you notice that, detective?"

"Sada and Amou both asked for Nagisa-chan's permission before leaving. Age-wise, she should be at the bottom since she's a minor. She can't drive either. Normally, the hierarchy would be the exact opposite."

"That's noteworthy too, but I'm talking about this."

While fidgeting from the cold, Enbi pointed at one corner of the screen.

"The video caught the door Sada left through. Amou left outside of the frame, but we might be able to see something through his. Pay careful attention. I'm going to play it frame by frame."

In the slow and jerky movement of the video, Sada Shirabe walked toward the door in the back.

What would we see there?

I focused to gather as much information as possible as the door slowly opened to reveal what was inside.

It was probably a private room for discussions with customers about foreign exchange deals and the like.

Inside, I saw something that wasn't a table but was still rectangular and supported by legs. What was it? An examination table or a stretcher?

Sada Shirabe had been introduced as a doctor, so it may have been an examining room for treating the injured.

But that kind thought was shattered by what I noticed next.

"Detective, look…"

"…"

Some rusted metal drums sat a short distance from the examination table. We could see two in the video. Even if it was a makeshift examining room, they wouldn't bring something that filthy inside.

In other words, that was not an examining room.

Then what was it? Why else would they have gathered medical equipment in that room?

The answer came from the metal drums. The top had been cut away like a can of food, making it much like the baths I had seen in old dramas.

First of all, the edge was stained a dark red.

And second, something like a broken branch was sticking out.

What is that?

Wait…no. It can't be…

"A human…arm?"

The Mystery Freak froze the video and zoomed in on that point. Without any image processing software, the pixels simply grew larger, so it was pixelated and blurry. Still, that was clearly not a mannequin or doll arm. It had a red and purple speckled color. It was filthy in a very organic way. It seemed to have grown discolored from within, which simply could not be reproduced with paint.

"Detective, I really hope this isn't true. I really do. But…"

"Just tell me."

"What if that doctor is the type who investigates his suspicions via autopsies? Like the crazy people from the UFO Village?"

There was nothing we could do.

This was not the same as kidnappers after ransom money. A colorful tightrope walk had begun.

Part 4

Whistle, whistle.

Whistle, whistle.

The sound of the whistling wind simply would not go away. A dry wind was blowing everywhere. It seemed to enter my ears and arrive deep inside my head. It disturbingly seemed to find its way into the wrinkles of my brain. It seemed to be gradually drying out my brain and transforming me into a helpless doll.

“Uuh…!?”

“Detective? Detective!? What’s the matter? You’re shaking.”

“What…? Dammit, the wind? Mystery Freak, is there any wind getting in here?”

“We’re inside a perfectly sealed vault. There’s nowhere for it to get in through. Are you really okay? C’mon, take a deep breath. I know it’s tough, but try to remember where we are.”

I gradually realized what was going on.

First of all, after going over everything we needed to discuss and sharing all of our information, we had been forced to fall silent. I had then drifted off to sleep and started dreaming.

I was hallucinating in my sleep.

No, given my current environment…

“Am I starting to show symptoms of prison psychosis? That isn’t good.”

Prison psychosis was a unique psychological state caused by the mental changes that occurred when unable to move for long periods of time. That could mean being physically restrained by handcuffs or other restraints, closed in a small room, or in some special cases, being constantly monitored by a GPS tracking device.

There were a wide variety of symptoms: auditory and visual hallucinations, various types of delusions, limited thoughts, explosive emotions, etc.

I had a decent knowledge of it in reference to investigations and detention, but this wasn't good.

The most effective treatment for prison psychosis was extremely simple: releasing the physical restraints. There were even cases where someone near a complete mental breakdown would recover in just a few hours after leaving the room. The creation of workout areas in prisons had been to prevent these sorts of symptoms.

But at the same time, the symptoms would only grow worse the longer you were imprisoned. Overcoming them while inside the room was incredibly hard to pull off. This was a completely different situation, but it felt something like a hopeless battle against motion sickness while still inside the moving vehicle.

This means…dammit.

"Mystery Freak, do you have anything to use as a restraint?"

"?"

"I have no idea how bad this is going to get! If I come down with delusions of persecution or I'm filled with explosive emotions, I might succumb to groundless suspicion and hurt you. So tie me up before that happens. It's too late to tie me up once I've started struggling!!"

"Detective, even if you do have prison psychosis, tying you up will only exacerbate your symptoms. I can't do that!"

"You might as well be in the same cage as a ferocious beast. Please just let me remain a police officer to the end!!"

She slowly shook her head.

I wasn't going to get any help out of her, but I couldn't let myself harm her either. I had to take precautions in case my symptoms worsened. My charging cable would be too weak, so I would have to use my cardigan and belt.

I slowly exhaled.

If I let my guard down, I started hearing that wind again.

A while later, I sat with my back to the metal bars and my arms around my knees.

I heard someone whispering behind me. Or I thought I did.

I knew in my head that the Mystery Freak and I were the only ones in the vault. I really did know that, but I still found myself looking back to check. I did it again and again. I was just like someone with OCD washing their hands again and again when feeling cornered.

I would tremble at how bizarre I had been acting five minutes before, but I would do the exact same thing five minutes later.

I really did feel like I was about to go crazy. Or had I already gone a little bit crazy? Just like Nagisa-chan and the others who believed in the zombies.

"…"

"Hey, Mystery Freak?"

I looked over and noticed something wasn't right.

Enbi wasn't reacting very much. She didn't reply and she didn't blink when I waved a hand in front of her eyes. I grabbed her cold shoulders and she finally slowly looked up.

When I looked into her unfocused eyes, I finally realized what this was.

Prison psychosis? She has it too!?

"Hey, pull yourself together. What are you looking at, Mystery Freak?"

"Eh? Oh… I'm fine, I'm fine. I won't be a burden on you… I'll handle it on my own…"

"Out with it! Keeping it inside won't help. Delusions aren't too much of a problem while they're in short-term memory, but they can be really hard to shake once they get to your long-term memory!!"

"Heh..eh heh heh… I can hear a siren."

"A siren?"

"It's coming from through the thick walls. Wee-ooh, wee-ooh… Yes! Yes, I know, I know!! No sound could get through those walls. But I'm suffocating in here. We'll be okay, won't we? Won't we? The bank isn't on fire and we weren't left here in a giant oven, right!?"

Both of us were heading down the same path.

It was only a difference in degree. The pressure of being sealed behind that door marked with the Hishigami crest had to be something else entirely for her.

"Listen, Mystery Freak. Prison psychosis acts differently in different people, but what matters is how long you're closed inside. How long has it been? At the very least, they haven't brought us any food, so it can't have been a full day."

"I don't know. I don't know! There are no windows or doors, so we can't see anything outside!! Who knows if it's day or night right now!? What if he…what if those grinning people come to try to kill me again!?"

Those words were like a slap to the face and they shook my heart too.

I was dragged in like her panic was contagious.

The time. Yes, we needed to know the exact time.

I made a desperate attempt to keep our mental lifeboat from flipping over.

"Look, Mystery Freak."

"What…?"

"It's my phone! Look at the clock. It's only been a few hours since then. It's fine. Any prison psychosis symptoms won't be all that severe yet! You're only imagining it!!"

I had no idea how much this would help, but as she listened to me and looked at the screen, the movements of her eyes gradually grew smoother. I could tell she was beginning to look outside her world of sluggish delusion.

We may have looked quite silly.

This may have been a feeling that only appeared when forcibly imprisoned without knowing what would happen tomorrow…or even an hour from now.

But we were truly at our limit here. I could feel my heart – my soul – wearing away like a clump of salt as time passed.

This trick would not last forever.

The phone batteries were finite. Human beings grew accustomed to stimuli, so the calming effect of viewing that digital data would fade. Once we began wondering if the number was wrong, it was all over. More importantly, prison psychosis grew worse as time went on.

What would happen to us once we lost this lifeline?

What would become of us once that support vanished and our hearts were crushed?

We didn't have a bed or even a blanket, but I found myself irregularly drifting to sleep and waking up.

I was horribly uneasy. My thoughts began to escape from reality.

"Detective, what are you thinking about?"

I was having trouble distinguishing miniskirt bikini Santa Enbi from a resident of my dreams.

"I was remembering the time we first met."

"Ha ha. Stop that. It's embarrassing."

"Yes, but we were kind of imprisoned then too. At least we could walk freely through the mansion, though."

The name "Glass House" came to mind.

A crazy family had lived deep in the mountains. In a direct interpretation of the family rules against hiding anything from one's family, the mansion's inner walls, floors, and ceilings had all been made of transparent reinforced glass to create an insane living space with zero privacy.

Lots of sinful people had gathered there like they had been pulled there by a magnet.

Then a murder had occurred.

After following an invisible line too solid to say it was “by chance”, the Mystery Freak and I had arrived there in different ways and witnessed the same incident.

“Come to think of it, you weren’t wearing a swimsuit back then.”

“Who do you think I’m showing my body off for? I’m ready for you to attack me, you know?”

When I had first met her, Hishigami Enbi had truly been a grim reaper.

She hadn’t had twintails then, nor had she worn a cute swimsuit. Her long hair had been swept back and she had worn a pitch black coat that covered her entire body all the way up to her mouth. Pants of the same color had decorative zippers here and there, but the thighs visible through them had seemed more dangerous than dazzling. Most of all, her eyes had given off the painful light of a rusted blade. Every word she spoke to someone had drawn out the information she needed as quickly as possible, and in exchange she had lost all trust. She had been that sort of grim reaper.

She had done whatever it took to solve the case.

For example, she would rewrite the dying message pointing to the murderer in order to see how all of the suspects reacted.

For example, she would preemptively but non-lethally attack the murderer’s second target to gather everyone’s attention and create an environment where the murderer could not easily act.

For example, she would direct suspicion onto the person the murderer cared for most in order to pressure the murderer into confessing.

Yes.

She had not actually pulled out a handgun or bazooka, but she may have been a lot like Mai.

“That really was an awful location.”

“What are you talking about? I’m still mad at you for peeping at the maid's changing like that."

"That was the transparent Glass House, but depending on the angle, glass will reflect light back like a mirror. In other words, you could create a black box there under the right conditions. Once we realized that, the rest was simple."

"Yeah. Most criminal tricks are like that."

After hearing that, I spoke to the Mystery Freak next to me.

"*That wasn't the trick in that case.*"

I felt faint.

With the unpleasant sensation of a flat spatula or wooden spoon scraping away at the bottom of my stomach, I finally managed to focus on reality again.

"What is it, Detective?"

The girl in front of me was not a convenient doll who would agree to anything I said.

She was a human being.

"It's nothing. I got over it."

I wiped cold sweat from my brow as I answered.

How long would this continue? Could we really laugh at Nagisa-chan and the others anymore?

Part 5

The series of self-made nightmares came to an abrupt end.

With a heavy mechanical rumbling, the round vault door slowly opened. Just in case, we hid our phones in our pockets. It was Nagisa-chan who walked in.

We were still trapped behind bars, but the difference was incredible.

It felt like fresh air was flowing in through that round hole and our sticky delusions were being driven out along with the vault's stagnant air.

Prison psychosis recovered as soon as one went outside.

This may have been a hint of that. The pressure of the Hishigami crest had been released.

"Heh heh. Here's your food."

Nagisa-chan held a few rolls, two bagged salads, and a plastic bottle of water. She shoved them between the bars.

"Did you steal these from the mall?"

"Good boy. You didn't bite at my hand."

"What would you have done if I had?"

"Hmm. It's a little sad, but the best way to restrain a fierce male is castration."

"…"

"Yes, yes. Stole them, you say? We did think about leaving money at the register at first, but *pretending* like that seemed so empty."

No one was coming back.

No one would ever take the money even if they left it. No one would blame them for taking the products. The normal system of paying for products no longer existed here.

At the very least, that was what she and the other rioters believed.

While focusing on that line between reality and delusion, I looked to Nagisa-chan's eyes. There was nothing I could do without some more information. I wanted as much to work with as possible if we were to eventually get out of here.

"You…"

"?"

"Nagisa-chan, I notice you aren't leaving the city."

After some thought, I asked a question.

"That mall was right next to Bozen City's border. With that truck, you should have been able to escape, so why are you staying in this mountain bank? Don't you know that the situation is only going to worsen if you hole up here?"

"Yes. Good boy. You've been thinking about this."

The high school girl readily agreed.

She also gave me a caramel.

"If we had known there were still no zombies the way you had come, we might have escaped then."

"…?"

"Who says the zombies are staying in the city? Even if it was fine before, the zombies might have taken over in the past few hours. And even if we escaped with a destination in mind, it's all over if that destination is filled with zombies. …That's why we need to think about going somewhere we know can protect us. Do you understand?"

"Somewhere you know can protect you?" asked the Mystery Freak in her Santa hat.

Nagisa-chan giggled.

"The police and firefighters probably wouldn't be any help anymore. …For now, we're thinking about the closest JSDF or American base. The problem is how far away that is. We checked on a map and it's more than a hundred kilometers. It wouldn't even take an hour if we drove full speed there, but there's no way it would be that easy with all of this going on. Going that far while slowed down by accidents is not going to be easy."

I understood what she was trying to say.

They needed to stockpile water, food, fuel, and weapons. They needed a ridiculous amount and they couldn't move until they had gathered it all.

Fearing nonexistent zombies, they would be eternally preparing for a journey to the ends of the earth.

"Shinobu-chan and the others were thinking of escaping outside the city with the paragliders at the mountain peak, but unlike an airplane, those don't continue flying. We'd be in trouble if we landed somewhere full of zombies, so we decided against leaving it all up to luck like that."

"Can you really do that?"

"Do what?"

"You're free to prepare like that if you want, but will it ever end? Simply living here takes food and fuel and the water and food will go bad on its own. It's like a bucket with a hole at the bottom. You're losing supplies even as you gather them."

"…I don't know."

Surprisingly, she readily agreed.

"I'm simply choosing the most realistic path I can think of and I can't know if it was the right choice without trying… A great deluge is coming, but I might not have time to build such a large ark. Still, doing nothing and drowning is out of the question. That's how I'm looking at this."

"…"

"Or maybe I just want an objective to think about. …After all, doing nothing feels like suffocating in this situation. If I'm not focused on something, it feels like I'm going crazy."

The conversation ended there.

She hadn't rejected us. She had simply ended it based on her own mood.

We were all breathing the same air, but we were on the inside and she was on the outside.

She held all the authority here.

As the high school girl began to leave, I shouted regretfully after her.

“Please wait! We’re trapped behind these bars either way, so you don’t need to close that door!”

“I do. Giving you what you want when you yell only teaches you to do it again.”

She wasn’t listening.

Next, the scantily clad Mystery Freak spoke up.

“B-but what do we do about a bath or toilet in here? There’s no intercom, so wouldn’t it be better to leave it so you can come here if we yell?”

Nagisa-chan only tilted her head a little.

“Come here? Why?”

“So you can let us out if we really need it…”

“…”

“Surely you aren’t saying you won’t let us out no matter what. Do you know what this place is!? It’s just a box! There’s no plumbing or anything!! You’re a girl too! Surely you understand!”

“I gave you water. You can figure out the rest on your own. If you do a good job, I’ll call you a good girl and give you a caramel.”

She was blunt.

The Mystery Freak was left flapping her mouth wordlessly and Nagisa-chan vanished through the round door.

With the heavy mechanical rumbling, we were once more closed in this double prison.

Part 6

Whistle, whistle.

Whistle, whistle.

While overwhelmed by the hallucination of whistling wind, I realized the vault's circular door was opening again. It was clearly too soon for the next meal. The Miniskirt Bikini Santa Mystery Freak was still so shocked by that last conversation that she had barely eaten anything.

Our visitor this time was the firefighter named…Amou Neko I think.

The young woman in a track suit approached the metal bars.

"We can finally speak."

"?"

"I'm really not sure what to do with Nagisa-chan's caramel rewards."

"…"

"She does it to Sada-san and me too, so we understand. She says that 'stay', 'sit', and 'come' are the basics. It's humiliating, but we can't stand up to her."

Her actions had bothered me a fair bit. Even now, she was toying with the oil lighter hanging in front of her ample chest. Had she come here without telling Nagisa-chan?

"Hey, you two came from outside, didn't you? You weren't hiding in Bozen City like the rest of us. You're from outside."

Outside.

Hearing that word while inside the bars almost made me laugh despite the situation.

"…What about it?"

"Can you tell me what it's like outside? It sounded like you didn't know about the zombies. What's it like out there? Does that mean the zombies haven't spread all that far!?"

How was I supposed to answer this?

There was of course only one true answer, but if this was like that UFO Village, then this decision could determine our fates. If I said there were zombies everywhere outside the city, we would remain imprisoned here. If I said there were no zombies outside the city, she would get angry at me for lying. Was there any other better answer?

I felt the same unreasonable tension as someone being forced to sign a contract written in a strange foreign language. For one thing, how did those three share the same delusions?

After some thought, I answered.

"I came here from Tokyo."

"?"

"I boarded my rental car at the local airport, picked her up on the road, and drove straight to Bozen City. I didn't see any zombies, but I can't tell you what things were like outside the car. I can't deny the possibility that zombies were hiding in all of the houses and stores or that we would have been attacked had we been walking through the streets."

"I knew it."

Amou Neko rubbed her chin.

I had no idea what it was she had "known", even though I knew not matching the conversation to her understanding would get us killed.

There may have been an "entrance" to sharing this delusion, but getting trapped too deeply would be a bad idea. I had to reject it in my heart and thoroughly analyze everything.

"If there might be zombies outside the city, we can't be optimistic. We need to prepare… Yes, that's right. Nagisa-chan's cattle cleaver only goes so far. We need the firepower to take out a dense wall of zombies…"

I heard the clicking of the oil lighter lid opening and closing.

Something like joy filled her eyes as she muttered to herself.

Her eyes had started to glitter once she was told there were zombies out there. That may have seemed contradictory at first, but it wasn't. Nagisa-chan had already told us they needed an objective or they would go crazy.

In Amou Neko's case, that would be securing weapons such as Molotov cocktails and flamethrowers. She was trying to obtain peace of mind by holding the firepower needed to break through a great swarm of zombies. So even if she didn't like the idea of zombies being there, she couldn't reach that peace of mind without them being there.

What was the right answer and where were the landmines?

Even a slight misreading here could cost us our lives.

"Don't worry. We'll be just fine… Once I get all the firepower we need, we can reach that base a hundred kilometers away…"

She was staring into the distance instead of at us.

A certain theory occurred to me, but that wasn't what I needed to address here and now.

"Are you all going to be okay?"

"Okay? What do you mean?"

"Well…"

The fingertips toying with the oil lighter came to a stop.

Was that a dangerous sign? I held my palms out toward the track suit firefighter.

"I may not be the expert, but aren't Molotov cocktails delicate? Dropping one would be bad and any rough movement with them stuffed in your backpack could break a bottle and cover your back in gasoline. Plus, they're heavy. And even if you have a lot of them, you can only throw one at a time. They aren't a weapon you can use with one in each hand."

"…"

"Preparing is fine, but wouldn't it be a good idea to lecture everyone on how to use them? Otherwise, our carelessness could burn the bank down."

"When the time comes to it, I'll do so. You two will be fighting against the zombies too."

…?

She didn't say anything about anyone else.

It was true we hadn't seen anyone but those three while trapped in this vault, but did that mean what I thought it might?

"And we need firepower for more than fighting the zombies. We also need to gather samples."

"Samples?"

"For Sada-san."

I felt a grinding pain in my heart.

Sada Shirabe was the doctor with that examining room. What were those rusted metal drums in that room and why was there a human arm sticking out of one? He seemed the closest to this group's crimes.

"He's all excited about figuring out how the zombies work, finding a weakness, and being able to fight them far more easily, but give me a break. People are getting back up after they die. Their eyes are muddy, their skin is discolored, and their hair is all dried out. That's what this place is, so we're going to have to escape outside and burn the place to the ground eventually. It's a waste of time."

"…"

Was this really Japan?

They were all insane. They had a variety of opinions, but I couldn't keep up with any of them.

"I don't know if it's to make himself look important, but he always exaggerates everything he says. When treating a tiny scrape, he'll go on about infectious diseases… He probably just wants us to think we need him. So we can't rely on his reports. It makes me wonder what he's even doing."

After her unilateral complaints, Amou Neko left the vault after satisfying no one but herself. Just like with Nagisa-chan, I could clearly see the difference between those inside and outside the bars.

Once we were alone, the Mystery Freak spoke up in her Santa hat and reindeer scarf cap after not taking part in that previous conversation.

“Did you notice, detective?”

“Yes. We can only make our best guess since we aren’t experts,” I said with a gulp. “But I think they might be suffering from prison psychosis too.”

It was a ridiculous theory.

The two of us were imprisoned here, so it seemed wrong to also place our captors in the category of victim.

However…

“They aren’t in this bank because they want to be here. They think this is their only option because of all the zombies everywhere. You could say they kind of are imprisoned in the bank.”

“Honestly, self-made delusions really aren’t funny when you take them this far.”

“Imprisonment situations are well-known for creating special mental states in both the victim and the perpetrator. Stockholm and Lima syndromes are the most well known. Nagisa-chan and the others may be coming apart little by little as much as we are.”

“But doesn’t prison psychosis recover pretty dramatically when you head outside?”

“It depends on their definition of ‘outside’. Even if they leave the bank, Bozen City is full of zombies. Outside the city is also full of zombies. Everywhere is full of zombies. If that’s how they see things, it’s like placing a can in a suitcase, placing the suitcase in a safe, and placing the safe in the basement. They’re still trapped in a larger cage, so they don’t feel freed.”

However, this shifted the risk up yet another gear.

They were already afraid of nonexistent zombies, so if they were also coming down with prison psychosis, we could less and less hope that they would make rational decisions.

Part 7

The next one to arrive was Sada Shirabe, the elderly man claiming to be a doctor.

As soon as he stepped inside, the smell stabbed into me. More than mere blood, it was a phlegmy smell that made me think of a cream color with a muddy green added in. Perhaps because the vault's air was so still, the slight oddity quickly ruled he entire area.

Whether for him or to discipline us, he held a few caramels in his hand, but he only looked saddened by them.

He stood in front of the bars and stared at us through his glasses.

"It would seem you have overcome the initial rite of passage. Your reactions are rational."

"Rite of passage?"

"If the conditions had been right, you would have become a zombie by about now. Personally, I would have welcomed the opportunity to obtain more samples."

"…"

I recalled the metal drums and what had looked like a human arm.

My tension grew, but if this was a group of rioters, this man was not the only twisted one.

"You can tell humans and zombies apart?"

"Mostly. There are few distinctive traits like the eyes, skin, and hair, but that is not necessarily everything. And I cannot deny the possibility of a variety that is visually indistinguishable from a human. I would prefer to have more samples in order to make a clearer definition."

He slowly shook his head and sighed while rubbing the temples of his glasses.

"It isn't easy for a variety of reasons. The zombies keep moving even if you crush their head or stab them through the heart. We have been decapitating them to make sure they cannot bite us, but it's hard to call that a fundamental solution."

What did the world look like in his eyes?

"But when they are burned such as with Amou's Molotov cocktails, autopsying the samples provides very little data. I want them as fresh as possible, but she does not know how to hold back. That's the dilemma here."

"Does the fire kill the zombies?"

"Who can say? They stop moving because the heat destroys all of their muscles, but that doesn't mean they cease to function. While I will examine a burned zombie's skull, I'm not about to stick my finger into its mouth."

Everything he said was insane, but I more or less understood what he was saying.

There was a crazy social structure here. Nagisa-chan was their leader. I had wondered why since she was the youngest, a minor, couldn't drive, and had no special skills such as first-aid, but this seemed to be the answer.

Sada wanted fresh samples, so he preferred Nagisa-chan and her cattle cleaver to Amou and her Molotov cocktails. And based on what Amou had said, those three were the only ones in the bank. From there, it was a matter of majority rule. Sada did not want Nagisa-chan to throw away her blade, so he would support her no matter what. That brought Nagisa-chan to the top regardless of what Amou thought.

Of course, I didn't want to imagine what these "samples" were in reality.

In that case, they may not have been as solid a group as I had thought. Sada seemed to be in his late forties, so it couldn't be fun having to take caramels to make Nagisa-chan happy when she was closer to being his granddaughter's age than his daughter's age. And Amou's frustration had to be building up when her opinion was always ignored.

It was possible something could tear them apart.

However, that would be meaningless if they destroyed each other while we were still trapped behind these bars. In that case, we would meet the same fate as a bug in a cage when a child forgets to look after it.

I had found the ignition switch, but we would be taken with them if I didn't use it right.

"Nagisa-chan said you were going to a JSDF or American base for help. I think she said the closest one is one hundred kilometers away. What do you think about that? Is it realistic?"

"It depends on the spread of the zombies and their total numbers. But our chances could change dramatically if I found a weakness in the zombies. I would have no complaints whatsoever if we could take them all out with a chemical like a gas or an acid."

He breathed a heavy sigh. There had been decent strength behind his words, but the basic premise seemed to have shifted when he continued.

"But I am against randomly leaving before we know more about them. Do you know what she's doing in between gathering weapons and food?"

"Which one? Nagisa-chan or Amou?"

"The high school girl."

That would be Nagisa-chan.

"She's placing duct tape on the road to spell out giant letters and piling up paper boxes and toilet paper to make campfires. She seems to be trying to send a message toward the sky, hoping a helicopter or something will see it. What do you think?"

"…"

I decided it would be better not to honestly answer that it sounded like a strange ritual.

"She's losing focus when there could be zombies hiding anywhere and lighting large fires will draw their attention. And even if a helicopter does see the message, she can't stay there. That's no different than good, old-fashioned ding-dong dash. It looks rational at first, but there is no logic to her actions. Enough so that it seems dangerous to let her lead us around forever."

Nagisa-chan was rational.

I started feeling faint when I heard that comment. This went beyond a foreign country's currency. I was pretty sure he was lowering the bar way too far there.

"But Amou is a problem too. What she's doing is the same as burning everyone away because she doesn't know what kind of pathogen she's dealing with. It's far too inefficient. And who knows if that will be enough to let her rest easy. Besides, do you know what she's doing now? Brewing alcohol."

"Alcohol…?"

Given my family, I frowned at that.

"Don't tell me she's getting drunk now of all times."

"No, not even she is that careless. At the moment, she is acquiring gasoline around the city and weaponizing it, but she seems to understand that she will eventually reach a limit. So she is apparently trying to create fuel from potatoes and corn as an alternative."

It seemed reasonable enough at first, but…

"How long will that take to complete?"

"Who can say? I don't drink, so I don't know. But is she planning to stay here for years on end with those barrels? While I agree that leaving at random is a bad idea, our situation will only grow worse if we do that."

After saying what he had to say, Sada Shirabe touched the temples of his glasses and moved away from the bars.

I had grasped the nuance here by this point. He was about to leave the vault.

"Anyway, if you two aren't turning into zombies, I will have to secure my samples elsewhere."

"…"

"And having more people to talk to is nice. Especially another man. …To be honest, I was suffocating until now."

That was all.

This time, Sada left the vault.

He was a dangerous person. He had already autopsied several corpses (whether the people had already been dead or killed just to be autopsied was still a mystery) and he intended to continue doing it, but there was nothing I could do.

It felt like the end of the world.

I felt like he was transforming into something inhuman.

Yes, like a senseless zombie that wandered around in search of fresh flesh.

Part 8 (3rd person)

When Hishigami Enbi, a girl wearing black clothes seemingly cobbled-together by decorative zippers, had first laid eyes on that detective, she had honestly wondered how he had survived this long.

There were apparently people who lived their entire lives without getting caught in the middle of a single criminal incident, but that detective was not one of them. He had chosen a profession that required walking through those bloody scenes, so he should have had a greater risk than normal of losing his life. And yet…

It happened inside the Glass House.

The giant mansion's inner walls, floors, and ceilings were all made of transparent reinforced glass so the family could not keep secrets from each other. The luxurious residence looked like a glass case allowing a glimpse inside the structure of an ant colony, but a closed room murder had occurred on that stage with no blind spots.

To solve the mystery and escape that mansion in the mountains alive, Hishigami Enbi had laid every trap she could to rattle the murderer.

No, she had manipulated more than just the murderer. Sometimes with words, sometimes with information, sometimes with evidence, and sometimes with bluffs. She had thoroughly threatened, intimidated, tempted, negotiated with, cooperated with, appealed to the emotions of, lured with tears, and built up a sense of justice in everyone inside that mansion.

She would have revealed the murderer's identity before long.

No matter how much danger the process put anyone in and even if they were completely unaware they were running right toward the cliff, that had still been the shortest and quickest path to a resolution.

But then that man had said something. That man who could have died at any time…no, that should have already died.

"Listen carefully, you little brat."

As the very last move to corner the murderer, that detective had taken the one and only action that had left Hishigami Enbi's predictions and control.

"We in the police don't head to the crime scene because we want to have fun solving a puzzle. We have no choice but to hunt down the criminal because it's necessary to save the person in front of our eyes. In that sense, your method earns zero points. Your answer won't protect anyone."

Under normal circumstances, she would likely have scoffed at the idea.

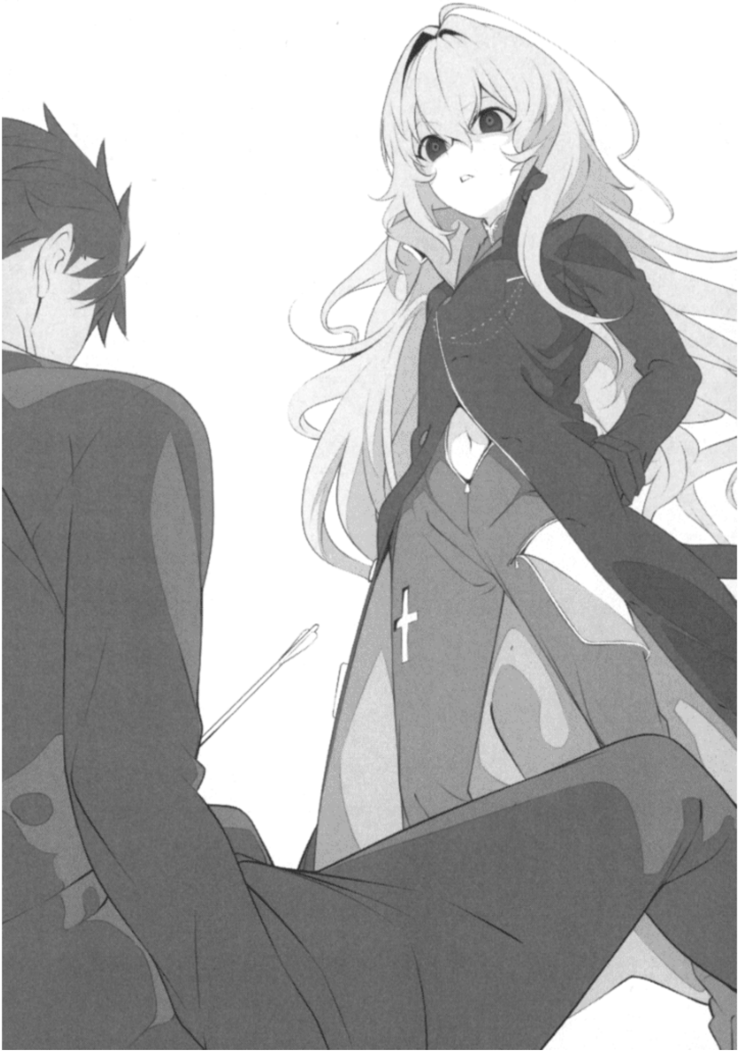
If it had been an adult who continued growing old without knowing just how cruel the world was, speaking down to her would never have reached her.

But that detective had been sitting on the floor with his back against a transparent wall.

An arrow was stabbed into his side and a dark red liquid was seeping into his suit through the shirt.

It had been a simple gamble.

She had set things up so that detective would run into the murderer. It would have ended without incident had the detective sold her out to escape harm. She had built up her plan from the very, very beginning under the assumption she would be betrayed, but that detective had broken free of her spell.



In the very, very end, he had chosen to trust the girl and had continued covering for her.

But not because he was stupid.

He had done it knowing he was being deceived.

“That was a meaningless action.”

At the time, those were the only words she had been able to force out.

She assumed she knew everything there was to know about him with that, but he had said more.

“Perhaps.”

He gave a slight smile and sounded satisfied with the result.

“But that action managed to save at least one person here.”

He reached his limit then.

He had fallen to the side and collapsed on the transparent floor. He may have gone into shock due to blood loss because he had not opened his eyes afterwards. All of the Glass House’s exits had been sealed, so there was no way to get him out of there. Unless, that is, one acquired the key ring the murderer had used to seal those exits.

“…”

Hishigami Enbi had always faced even the most difficult case and coldly solved it, but on that day, her thoughts branched out to a completely different process for the first time in her life.

She would solve this case for someone other than herself.

She was intent on saving Detective Uchimaku Hayabusa who had continued believing her despite knowing it was a trap.

She would repay him for feeling that way.

With determination in her heart, that Hishigami Woman walked through the Glass House once more.

Part 9

How much time had passed since we had been closed inside the bank vault?

It felt like just a few minutes, but it also seemed like we had been left all alone for several days.

I had lost all sense of time.

I felt like I had been diluted away like a single drop of ink in a giant lake.

It was a movement from the Mystery Freak that broke me free of that gentle decay.

"…?"

At first, I thought she was cold.

I thought about giving her my cardigan, but something was wrong. Her trembling wasn't stopping. In fact, it was growing at an accelerated rate. She had been holding her knees in her arms, but the next thing I knew, she had collapsed to the cold floor. She lay on her side and her entire back seemed to writhe about instead of just her arms and legs.

"Hey, Mystery Freak? What's going on? Dammit!!"

Something like foam was coming from the corner of her mouth. The switchover between esophagus and trachea wasn't working properly, so the saliva and stomach acids were mixing with the air.

I considered the possibility of the food from Nagisa-chan having been poisoned, but I quickly rejected it. She had barely eaten anything. There were some substances that could kill a human with just 1% of a gram and there were some slow-acting poisons, but there was no point in using a slow-acting poison when they had us imprisoned behind bars. They could easily have killed us with that cattle cleaver if they had wanted to.

Which meant…

"Has her prison psychosis gotten so bad it's messing with her autonomic nerves!?”

Her hips hopped unnaturally from the floor, the scarf cap danced around, and even more foam came from her mouth.

Oh, no. She won’t be able to breathe!!

“Can you hear me? Hey, can you hear me!? Spit it out!! If you don’t clear your windpipe, you’ll die!!”

“…”

Her eerily wriggling throat stopped moving a little.

It wasn’t that she couldn’t hear me. What was this? Was she just hesitant to do something so shameful in front of a guy? This wasn’t the time for that!

“You idiot!!”

I didn’t have time to get her consent. I leaned over her writhing body and forced my right hand’s index and middle finger between her tiny lips. I was trying to secure a path for her to breathe even if I had to force it open.

That was when a solid pain raced through my fingers.

I didn’t know if she was conscious or not and the pain didn’t matter. I continued moving my fingers while doing my very best to ignore the horrifying sensation that pierced the flesh and even reached the bone. I opened her mouth wide and scraped out what had built up inside.

“Ghahh!? Cough, cough!!”

After a sticky sound, she started coughing. I could hear her beginning to breathe again, even if it did whistle like a broken flute.

However, that did not eliminate the prison psychosis itself.

She gave me an oddly relaxed smile while I was practically leaning over her.

Was she really looking at me?

“Yes…that’s right, detective. I had justified my actions by assuming that anyone would do the same thing in such an extreme situation.

That's why I realized something when I saw you: people never have to lose sight of themselves if they work at it hard enough."

"…?"

What was she talking about?

No. "When" was this Enbi from?

"I rethought who I had been in the past. I changed my hairstyle, I chose cute clothes, and I thought about whether I really needed to keep an ulterior motive in everything I said. Yes, it's thanks to you that I changed from being a mystery solving device to an actual girl."

Her eyes seemed focused on some distant age.

She had left me behind in the present as she spoke.

"But it was no use…"

"What was?"

I knew she couldn't really hear me, but I asked anyway.

Her ranting words apologized to someone other than me.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, detective. In the end, I couldn't do anything as normal as solve problems for someone else. I was only pretending to and I was gradually moving further and further away from it. Maybe in the end, a Hishigami Woman is only a Hishigami Woman… We can only destroy things, not create them. We can only take people from this world, not protect them. I can see why the main branch hates us so much…"

I don't care about that.

"But you treated me like a living creature."

The Hishigami Women don't matter.

"I'm the worst possible Thanatos and maybe I shouldn't have been born, but that at least made me happy. It made me glad I was born. So I'm grateful, detective. I'm grateful, but I can't become the kind of person you think I am…"

Your habit of inappropriately showing up at dangerous crime scenes isn't *an issue. It doesn't matter in the slightest that you gather information from who-knows-where, hunt down murderers in absurd ways, and keep the smell of death as a constant companion.*

You've seen it, haven't you?

You've seen that final connection to the people who were caught in unreasonable crimes and dragged into the darkness. You've seen those desperate scratch marks. You've probably seen them even more than a police officer like me. There were countless cases we in the police would never have been able to solve without you!!

I was reminded of the rumored motto of the Hishigami family's main branch: The Hishigami Woman bring calamity.

"Listen carefully."

I started feeling dizzy.

As if the panic were contagious, the world around me went mad. The whistling of the cold wind grew louder.

I clenched my teeth, ignored it, and shouted at the top of my lungs.

"At the very least, you aren't someone who should have been killed the instant you were born because you bring calamity by the very act of breathing!! And if anyone tries to treat you that way, I'll do something about it. That's a job for the police!! Don't forget that!!"

Getting my emotions worked up may have only made it worse.

The whistling of the wind seemed to be filling my head. I felt even dizzier and I started to lose my balance. I couldn't let myself crush the Mystery Freak below me, so I too collapsed onto my side.

Was this it?

Was this the end? There wasn't any real threat outside and Nagisa-chan's group didn't intend to kill us, but were we going to roll on our backs and shrivel up like a bug in a cage when a child forgets to look after it?

The auditory hallucination grew unbelievably loud.

The sound seemed to take over all of my senses like I was being swarmed by invisible army ants.

“…?”

But as I abandoned myself to the sound, I finally realized something.

I pressed my ear against the cold floor and actually tried to hear the sound for once.

…*You’re kidding.*

“I can hear it.”

“What…is it, detective?”

“The wind!! I can hear it below the floor. But why!?”

I reached into my pocket, pulled out the stainless steel pen attached to the memo pad, held it in my fist, and stabbed it into the vault floor.

It may have looked like I had gone completely insane, but my actions bore fruit.

“It’s crumbling.”

At first, I couldn’t believe it myself.

“The floor is crumbling!! It connects to somewhere!!”

My mind made an explosion of connections.

In the rental car on the way to Bozen City, I had been the one to mention the high crime rate in rural areas and the robbers who dug tunnels to bank vaults.

Was this a case of that?

The whistling wind hadn’t been a hallucination at all. What if it had been getting in from this hand dug tunnel that was only separated by a thin layer?

“Wake up, Mystery Freak.”

“Hm…?”

“There’s an exit! We can get out!! So look, Mystery Freak!!”

I had only opened a fist-sized hole, but I could feel the cold air flowing in. It was completely different from the vault's stagnant air. It held the biting chill of the outside air.

Prison psychosis sometimes improved dramatically when freed from one's bonds.

As the existence of this obvious exit gradually worked its way into the Miniskirt Bikini Santa Mystery Freak's mind, her eyes seemed to begin focusing on reality once more.

But…

I heard a heavy metallic rumbling.

The round vault door was slowly, slowly opening.

"…!!"

My throat dried up.

Why now!? That Hishigami crest would never open when we wanted it to!!

We couldn't let Nagisa-chan, Amou, and Sada find this hole. They were trying to "protect" us, but they also feared the zombies. Who could say how angry they would be if they discovered a hole to the outside world not a part of their "pathway" to guide the zombies like fish.

But at the same time, we had a goal now. If we could get through this one conversation and they left the vault, we could dig our way out and escape right away.

We had thirty seconds until the door fully opened.

We didn't have time, so I removed my cardigan, placed it over the fist-sized hole, and lay the weakened Mystery Freak on it.

Then the time came.

"We'll be having you help with our field work starting tomorrow, so I wanted to have a meeting now. Getting lost on your first outing could cost you your life."

"You really are lucky. And what is this? It kind of stinks in here…"

“It reminds me of stomach acid. Perhaps I should inspect them.”

To make matters worse, it was all three of them.

If any one of them had some doubts and decided to investigate inside the bars, they would easily find the hole. If that happened, it was even possible they would kill us on the spot.

So I would use everything at my disposal.

I had to remember everything. Their group was not as solid as it seemed. And the things each one had not said could be surmised from what the others said. Even while imprisoned in this vault, I could guess at the problems facing them.

There was a fatal crack from something that had happened here.

If I could expose that, they would have difficulty maintaining their temporary alliance.

I had to think back to that insane Glass House. The biggest key to magic tricks wasn’t some grand contraption. It was misdirection. To complete our magical escape act, I needed to gather the necessary cards.

With that in mind, I had to set up the rules.

What did I want to do most? Solve the mystery of what had happened here? Catch the criminal who had chopped up his so-called samples? Snap these three out of their zombie delusion?

It wasn’t any of those.

It was Hishigami Enbi. She was an exception among exceptions, but she was still a minor civilian and I had to get her out of here safely.

I had to abandon all else. Arresting the criminal could wait. Their delusions could be handled by a counselor. I didn’t need any weapons and I didn’t need to defeat anyone. I wasn’t a pacifist, but to ensure Enbi’s safety, starting a big fight was not the best idea. That was why I chose a route with no deaths.

Of course, I couldn’t just use a random bluff. If the misdirection for my magic trip failed, my card-handling skills and trick box would be useless. They would quickly reach the secret of the hole in the floor. They wouldn’t bite unless it was true.

However, I couldn’t just insist there were no zombies. They were basing everything on the assumption that there were zombies, so even if there were no zombies, I couldn’t draw their attention unless I was pretending there were.

This wasn’t about the existence of zombies or lack thereof.

I had to think about what had driven them to act in this world that they believed was full of zombies.

And with that, I had to solve this.

Nagisa-chan, Amou Neko, and Sada Shirabe’s relationship had fallen apart long ago, so I only had to draw their attention to that pain. That would probably work best.

I knew what I had to do.

I knew what I would gain if I succeeded and I knew what I would lose if I failed.

It was show time. This was a once-in-a-lifetime game with our lives on the line.

Part 10

Nagisa-chan and I faced each other through the cold metal bars.

Amou Neko and Sada Shirabe stood on either side of her.

They clearly had the upper hand here. They did not need to open the bars and throwing a single Molotov cocktail inside would surround us in flames and smoke.

They held our lives in their hands, but I still opened my mouth.

“Nagisa-chan.”

“What is it…?”

“If there really are zombies out there, I agree that’s bad. It would be best if we all worked together to fight them. We need to be working too, not just sitting here being protected by you. But…”

“?”

“Can we really wait around like this? I don’t think our enemies are only on the outside.”

I could almost feel tension freezing the air.

The first one to bite was Amou Neko the firefighter.

“Are you saying we’ll turn against Nagisa-chan and betray her? Why would we!? There’s nothing in it for us. If anything, we need *more* people here.”

“I’m not talking about that,” I cut in. “Hey, Nagisa-chan. I bet you could chop off human limbs and heads using that large cattle cleaver you have there, but since you have to get close to the zombies to use it, it probably doesn’t help much when fighting a large group. Isn’t that right?”

“Good boy. Have a caramel. Yes, the zombies are as strong as bears… We can get by if we use weapons to escape that advantage of theirs, but there’s nothing we can do if a bunch of them grab at us and knock us down.”

"And to deal with groups like that, Amou Neko's Molotov cocktails come in handy. But of course, that leaves the zombie's corpse – remains? – completely burned."

"What about it?"

Amou sounded suspicious as she held the oil lighter hanging in front of her track suit's chest.

I slowly exhaled and continued.

"Then who are the samples being autopsied in the examining room?"

"…"

Sada Shirabe fell silent.

I could see some slight sweat on his noticeably wrinkled skin.

"Based on what you've been saying, you haven't autopsied just one zombie. You seem to have safely acquired several zombies for that, but Nagisa-chan's weapon isn't suited for large groups and the Molotov cocktails would leave them too burned to use as a sample. Then how did you get them?"

I of course had an idea.

"That leads me to suspect it has to do with the reason we're being imprisoned here. You said you tried rescuing some people isolated in the city, but giving them too much freedom allowed the zombies to attack and wipe them out while transferring them from the microbus to the bank. That's why you aren't giving us any freedom. In other words, you would have had a lot of zombies there. Or should I call them possible future zombies?"

I didn't know how long they thought it took for a bitten person to become a zombie. I also didn't know if only the dead became zombies or if even the living would if they were bitten.

However, this was a likely delusion and a simple image they could easily share.

Plus, Sada Shirabe had said we would have become zombies "by about now".

"Defeating a completed zombie isn't easy, but what if they're in the process of ‘turning’? For Nagisa-chan…no, for Sada Shirabe, that accident was probably an amazing opportunity. He could easily acquire more samples then he could have hoped for otherwise.”

But what had happened in reality? Had the microbus been attacked in a conflict between human groups? Had that irrational group looked like zombies to Nagisa-chan’s group? Had they decided no human could do something like that?

“What about it?” calmly asked Nagisa-chan. “It’s true Sada-san acquired plenty of samples and chopped them up in that room, but so what? We aren’t worried about what happens to the zombies’ bodies. They aren’t alive and they aren’t human. I see no reason for you to accuse us of wrongdoing.”

“But Sada Shirabe still hasn’t found a weakness in the zombies.”

The elderly man’s shoulders shook.

“He’s so worried that he even came to the vault to see if we had become zombies. After all, if he doesn’t find anything, he loses his place here. He seems to have positioned himself below Nagisa-chan to hold Amou in check, but he doesn’t want to keep sucking up to her forever.”

So…

“He needs as many samples as he can get. And if he can’t get any new ones, he doesn’t want to use up his current stock. Just like someone who can’t buy a new car will fix up their old one and use it.”

“You-…!!”

“Get to the point.”

Sada tried to shout in anger, but Nagisa-chan cut him off.

Her voice almost seemed to ooze out.

“The autopsied samples are taken outside and burned by Amou Neko. You don’t know if the zombies can keep reviving forever, but you don’t want one to get up from the examination table.”

“What…what about it?”

Amou toyed with her oil lighter and I slowly answered.

"*Is that really happening*?"

"…"

"As I said, Sada Shirabe can't afford to lose his samples. If he can't get new ones, he has to reuse old ones. In that case, does he really have as many samples as he's told you? He can still use those old cars if he fixes them up, so is he really sending them out to be scrapped?"

"Lies!!" shouted Sada Shirabe. "If…if I were doing that, those zombies would be flooding our living space from within the bank! It would render our safe zone created by diverting their curiosity completely useless!!"

"True."

I held my hand out to the side.

I held the Mystery Freak's smartphone and showed them the screen.

"But you were willing to take that risk in order to reverse this little society where you're pushed around by these young girls, weren't you?"

It showed the examining room just as Sada Shirabe opened the door.

What seemed to be a human arm was visible sticking out of a metal drum. At the very least, it did not seem to be burned black by a great heat. No matter how well-ventilated it was, doing that in the bank would fill the building with smoke, so they wouldn't have done that in the first place.

"At the very least, there is an unburned arm in the examining room right now." I said it like I was speaking to small children. "So shouldn't you go check on that? If the owner of that arm isn't being watched, who knows when it'll start moving."

The fear of zombies had to be the top priority for them.

It was a shared fear or a group delusion.

So they would act.

Even if it meant doubting one of their own and even if it was only a tiny doubt, they could not rest easy until they had completely erased that doubt.

I felt the flow of air changing.

Good. The setup for my magic trick was complete. If their focus was directed away from the vault for five or ten minutes, we could widen the hole in the floor, slip out, and escape outside. That way I could save Enbi without anyone having to die.

“Good boy. You really are Shinobu-chan’s uncle. And just to be sure…”

“Wait.”

“Yes, just to be sure.”

Nagisa-chan turned toward the exit, Sada Shirabe grew nervous, and Amou Neko showed no sign of defending him as they all moved toward the exit.

But just before they left…

“…”

I heard a hoarse voice.

The Mystery Freak’s mouth was moving as she lay on the floor.

“Yes. Sada Shirabe wanted to obtain more samples…”

En…bi?

I didn’t know what she was trying to do. Why would she stop them from leaving?

“If he could find a weakness in the zombies before anyone else, his position would be secure. That meant he could not leave his supply of samples up to chance…”

Wait.

But…

“The zombies search for their targets by smell, so they couldn’t find a target inside a bus that had all its windows closed. …Unless, that is, someone pressed the AC switch to let out the bus’s air and thus its smells.”

There's no logical reason to take this any further!!

"If Sada was driving the microbus like he was that light truck, then it wouldn't have been hard to press the AC switch right next to him. If he left behind that hint for the zombies and left the bus in order to open the bank's door, he could watch from safety as the survivors were attacked. That way he would have a safe and secure supply of future samples."

……

Nagisa-chan turned her head to look at Sada Shirabe. The amount of sweat pouring from his face was impossible to ignore now. The Hishigami Woman's box of death had been opened.

"I-it's not true…"

"What isn't?"

"She's making it up!! I…I didn't do that! She's just guessing! What proof does anyone have!?"

That didn't matter.

This was a tiny society supported by delusion. They had to understand that after carrying deadly weapons in front of a police officer and shamelessly announcing that they had at least chopped up human corpses without permission. Normal investigation and questioning standards weren't going to work here.

No one cared how anyone treated zombies under that insane world's rules, but what about living humans? Nagisa-chan had "protected" the Mystery Freak and me, so wouldn't that be a major taboo?

In that case, how would Sada Shirabe be treated under those rules upheld by just these three people?

Who would make the final judgment?

Nagisa-chan tossed a caramel between the bars.

"I think we might just have to *exile* you."

She placed a hand on the elderly man's shoulder. He tried shouting and brushing it off, but she held on with a vicelike grip. The long cattle cleaver named Namagusa glittered in her other hand. Next, Amou Neko held the oil lighter at her chest and used the other hand to grab Sada Shirabe's arm. Held on both sides, he was practically dragged out of the vault.

Nagisa-chan looked back just once.

She gave us the smile one gave a kind neighbor who had pointed out a problem.

"Wait just a moment."

I heard a scream, but even that was sealed away as the round door closed with a mechanical rumbling.

I blankly looked over at the Mystery Freak.

"Why did you go that far? We could have kept anyone from dying."

"…"

"All we needed to do was escape from here!! There was no reason *to push them that far*!!"

When I yelled in her ear, Enbi sluggishly looked over at me.

Don't tell me…

"Because…I'm a Hishigami Woman, so I'll solve the mystery…no matter what it takes…"

Prison…psychosis.

Was she staring at some different time and place? Had she made her observation as a simple reaction because she didn't have it in her to think about things like right and wrong?

I grabbed and shook the metal bars, but they wouldn't budge. And even if I could break them, there was no way of getting through the meter thick Hishigami crest door.

We could not save Sada Shirabe.

And if they came back, it would all be for nothing.

What was my original goal? Could I really let her die here?

"…!!!!!!"

I moved on to my next task as if to shake something off of me.

I moved the Mystery Freak and my cardigan aside and began swinging my stainless steel pen down on the crumbling floor. I destroyed the outside of the hole to widen it enough for someone to pass through.

The hole was pitch black.

I used my cellphone's backlight and found it wasn't all that deep.

I climbed down first and supported the Mystery Freak from below as she slowly followed my instructions. Perhaps because she had been showing so much skin, she felt very cold.

The scent of dirt was oppressively strong and the wind carried a biting chill.

Still, we had gotten out. It was hard to say our performance warranted a perfect 100, but at the very least, we had achieved our goal of escaping imprisonment.

The simple act of breathing felt like it was washing away the dark stain that had soaked into the depths of my mind.

The prison psychosis was gradually going away.

"Are we…saved?"

"We are," I told her while lending her my shoulder. "I see no reason to doubt it."

She was dragging her unpleasantly cold body along, so she leaned against me to slowly share in my body heat. Then she gave a casual comment.

"What should we do when we get back?"

"I want to take a hot shower and sleep for three days straight."

"You're young, so how about something more exciting?"

"Give me an example."

"Well, you do have your arm around a girl as cute as this. Why not think about a date at an amusement park? If that's what's waiting for me, I think I could escape Bozen City even if the entire world were destroyed.”

…

After some thought, I answered.

“Okay.”

“Eh!?”

“If that’s all it takes to give you the hope to overcome this hell and to give you the resolve needed to face this hell without trying to escape in your mind, then I’ll gladly go on a date with you just once.”

“Y-you!! Y-y-y-y-you, I, but… I’m happy, but…I-I don’t think I’m ready in more ways than one…!!”

She started stammering for some reason and I couldn’t see her expression while lending her my shoulder.

“Just to be clear, I’m only talking about spending some wholesome time together on one of my days off.”

“I love you, detective!! Smooch!!!!”

“You idiot! That’s already leaving wholesome far behind! Don’t hug me with all your strength like that!!”

I tore the overly energetic Mystery Freak off of me.

At any rate, this was over.

We could finally say goodbye to that hellish box that Nagisa-chan and the others had created.

Part 11

…

…

…

Something wasn't right.

I realized that after walking for quite a while through the hand-dug tunnel.

Yes.

For quite a while.

"Detective, where are we? I feel like we've been walking for half an hour now."

"Don't ask me…"

The tunnel was not flat. It moved up and down, but it seemed to be generally sloping downwards. We were continuing further and further toward the depths of the earth where no light could reach us. I started wondering if we had taken a wrong turn somewhere, but we couldn't turn back now. It was possible we had missed a small side tunnel somewhere, but if Nagisa-chan's group had pursued us, turning back would take us right to them.

Where were we?

Where had we wandered?

I gulped and a few pieces of information randomly connected together in my mind. Not even I knew why I had made these connections.

——We had originally come to Bozen City in pursuit of several missing person cases from over ten years ago.

——Nagisa-chan's group had moved between the bank in the mountain and the city at the base using a portion of the tunnels known as Mikuchi-sama. Mikuchi-sama tunnels seemed to exist all throughout the mountain like an ant colony.

“Detective… Did the robbers who went after that bank really dig the entire tunnel on their own? What if…”

“What if they used the Mikuchi-sama tunnel as a starting point to make their job easier?”

——I had heard the name Mikuchi-sama at a festival back when I was in school. However, the roots of that name were not exactly pleasant.

“Oh…”

I noticed a smell.

It was a unique smell one would never find in an untouched abandoned house. It was a human smell that reminded me of dried sweat built up over a long period of time. I could tell it was reaching us from beyond the still darkness that my cellphone’s backlight couldn’t reach.

It came back to me as I heard an odd noise.

——Mikuchi-sama was a giant hole at the peak of the mountain that sinners were thrown into. But if the people’s hearts decayed, the calamity sealed in that hole would burst out.

“Dammit.”

——Where had those missing people gone?

——More importantly, what was that moving in the darkness now?

“*There really were zombies?*”

There was nothing we could do.

Countless muddy eyes reflected the cellphone backlight as they stared at us from the darkness.

Chapter 3: Entrance to the Gaping Abyss that Looks Up toward Heaven by Hishigami Mai

Part 1

A V-shaped flying wing owned by Hyakki Yakou flew three thousand meters above Bozen City.

“Hmm?”

I twisted my hips and gently spun my arms to see how I was doing.

Yeah, it tugs at the skin a little.

I was wearing a Yozakura Ver. 3 made by Hishigami Biochemical Industries, with some of my own custom modifications made. There are nursing suits woven with flexible tape meant to extend one’s back muscles, right? This used the same tech, but it covered me from shoulders to groin with a skintight material much like bike shorts. It also had collar and apron-like parts attached to make it look kunoichi-esque. It was mostly black and beige, but it also had some purple flower petals for decoration. It also partially covered my elbows and knees. …Oh, and as a matter of taste rather than practicality, I had torn off the sickening Hishigami crest over my right breast.

It provided no defense and was even more excessively decorative than bikini armor.

But in my case, it was highly effective. After all, I had modified the human body below it, so I didn’t need a solid defense that could deflect external attacks. I needed some strengthening to prevent me from destroying my own joints when I went all out.

Why had I arranged to have this newly made? There were two major reasons.

First, this job was not about infiltration or spying, so I didn’t have to pretend to be a civilian.

And second…

“If Majina’s group is involved, Hishigami Shikimi will be there.”

Hishigami Shikimi was the founder of the Hishigami line.

That woman had truly lived for more than a thousand years and yet was still active.

Her anti-aging techniques were so effective that her physical body apparently grew younger as the years past.

I had lost to her once and she had easily swept me aside. But unfortunately, this field didn't allow me to just say no because I was no match for her.

If I didn't have a method to kill her, I had to find a new method. That was what a professional did.

The small canine Youkai rubbing his cheek against my leg hesitantly spoke up.

"I-is Majina-sama, um, really connected to this incident?"

"Most likely. And even if he isn't, we still need to break in and resolve it as quickly as possible."

The people caught in Bozen City's zombie panic may have been hoping for someone – anyone – to show up and save them. Whether it was the police or the military, they wanted someone to bring an end to the city's insanity.

But that wouldn't work and there was a simple reason why.

"After all, the zombie panic may have started in Bozen City, but it has spread to thirteen different cities in five regions. Once it reaches a certain point, they won't be able to seal the cities off anymore and the panic will cover all of Japan. Hyakki Yakou isn't stupid. Normally, the Top 5 would have detected this and put together a countermeasure before it progressed this far. Since they were so late, the odds are good someone with a deep knowledge of Hyakki Yakou's methods planned it out."

"And Bozen City…is at the center of it all?"

"Everyone was slow to catch on, so the police, the JSDF, and even our field were late to react. The cup of water is already about to overflow. But if we stop things here, it'll all be over. I'm sure that's accurate, but it seems too blatant. They're probably confident they can handle an infiltration by the young lady and her Hyakki Yakou."

When it came down to pure firepower, the current Hyakki Yakou was the greatest force in the nation.

They had plenty of ways to wipe an entire city from the map and the Top 5 could each sink a continent if they went all out.

But the real problem was Hishigami Shikimi.

Just like me – if not more than me – she was the worst of the Hishigami Women.

Her raison d'être was to destroy stable organizations and societal systems, so Hyakki Yakou would be the ultimate bait.

If she was caught in a giant explosion, she would undoubtedly fake her death and make a comeback.

Sending in the Top 5 with their ridiculous firepower would let her manipulate them and lead them toward self-destruction.

Not to mention that Hyakki Yakou was caught between father and daughter at the moment. They didn't know which one to follow, so they would definitely collapse if they tried a traditional attack.

And if I could figure that out, then Hishigami Shikimi's mind had to be filled with far, farrrr more gruesome methods.

"Why would Majina-sama do this? What is he thinking?"

"Who knows. He hid in the shadows of history for a decade, let those idiots live while thinking they'd assassinated him, and couldn't even take revenge for the attempt on his wife's life. Who knows how much that boiled his heart. He said something about taking Hyakki Yakou from the young lady, but what does that have to do with this zombie panic? I'm not even sure why he started wanting Hyakki Yakou again after all this time. But…"

"But?"

"I'm not some middle school girl fidgeting in unrequited love. If I want to know how he feels, I just have to find him and ask him."

I made it sound simple.

I had to do the same thing no matter who my enemy was. If I started thinking about some special way of dealing with that special enemy, I had already been swallowed up by them. Never wavering no matter what was one form of strength.

"First, I'll defeat Hishigami Shikimi as a fellow Hishigami Woman." My voice was nearly singing. "We can send in the Top 5 once that tricky woman has been defeated. After that, normal firepower can do the talking. We'll have better odds of pushing Majina's group back with pure numbers too."

That said, the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi that had appeared at the end was a complete unknown.

"Th-then you know where Majina-sama's group is hiding?"

"Mt. Boseki, one of the mountains bordering Bozen City. More specifically, in the network of tunnels filling that dormant volcano like a labyrinth. Aka Mikuchi-sama."

My preparations were complete.

To make our final greeting, the Sunekosuri and I walked through the traditional Japanese-style interior of the plane to meet the young lady who led Hyakki Yakou.

The scent of incense filled the room where a small girl in thick mourning clothes sat. A canine Youkai even smaller than the Sunekosuri (only about five centimeters) sat across from her.

Or rather, it was chowing down on a small plate of chicken.

"So good!! I can't get enough of your chicken, Hafuri-sama! Munch, munch!!"

"Heh heh. The chicken isn't going to run away. And there's plenty more, so slow down and savor it."

The Sunekosuri's fur bristled at the sight.

"Waaahh!! G-Gisuke!? How can you be so rude in front of Hafuri-sama!?"

"Oh, dad. Hafuri-sama is an expert cook! Munch, munch! You'll understand if you try some! I set some aside for you here! Munch, munch!!"

"Don't talk with your mouth full. …And I'm so sorry, Hafuri-sama! I'll have him move elsewhere, so please forgive him!!"

"I don't mind. I enjoy it more when he can relax."

"Oh, Hafuri-sama, I want to rub up against you now!"

"Yes, yes. Let me move my legs over. Come here, Gisuke."

Hmm.

She may have disliked the way all of her bodyguards would pat her head. She seemed to be letting off some steam no that she had found someone she could act like an older sister to.

Hmm! She's so damn cute!! If I had the time, I'd pat her head like crazy!!!! (←Vicious circle)

The room may have seemed extremely calming, but there was actually something horribly off about it.

There was a two meter or more family crest of pure gold directly behind the young lady. Normally, it would have been worth hundreds of millions of yen.

But it had been sliced in two by a sword.

Hyakki Yakou believed in blood. Majina was the pure-blooded father and Hafuri was the half-blooded daughter. If the two came into conflict, it was obvious who most of the organization would side with.

Or it should have been.

But the young lady had changed things. She had raised the paranormal sword prepared by one of the Top 5 and she had sliced that symbol of Hyakki Yakou in front of everyone.

"Not even I was aware of my mixed blood. I had no intention of hiding it."

With those words, she had turned the unbelievably sharp blade around, grabbed the tip, and held the hilt out towards the others.

The slightest of tugs on the blade and she would have lost all of her fingers.

"If anyone does not wish to continue serving someone of impure blood, then slice me in half and store me in your household shrine. Just like this family crest. If that will maintain order in this small field and if it will prevent any further conflict with Majina's group, then I do not mind in the slightest."

If she had simply held up her blood or family name, she would not have been able to restrain the chaos. Hyakki Yakou would have broken apart and descended into chaos just as Majina had wanted.

But that had not happened.

It may have been that the battle with the Aoandon had given her the edge she needed to not simply rely on others.

So the symbol worn by everyone here was now incomplete, like the crescent moon.

They had sworn to bear the complete family crest only once Majina's group had been fully defeated.

That said, it wasn't a perfect resolution. The many followers of the giant organization were watching carefully. If the young lady made any kind of mistake and failed to achieve results, she would be deemed unfit to lead and they would all join Majina. They would shift that way like a great avalanche.

That meant she needed to brace herself now.

"I see you're ready to go."

"More or less."

My target was the great hole known as Mikuchi-sama in the depths of Bozen City's Mt. Boseki. Breaking through the zombie-ridden city and making my way to the mountain would have been difficult, but as I'd said, we were on the flying wing.

Why bother with all that other stuff when I could strap on a parachute and jump straight down to the great hole on the mountain peak?

It was apparently located near *an unnatural dog square*.

"Allow me to go back over our objective. We are hiring you to resolve the issue in Bozen City that has caused the zombie panic spreading to other regions as well. We also wish to eliminate Majina's group that we expect is closely related to all this. You will be the first wave and your top priority should be defeating Hishigami Shikimi."

"Sure thing."

"Majina claims to be the true leader of Hyakki Yakou and he intends to hijack the organization we have built. What that has to do with this zombie panic is still a mystery, but if this situation continues, it will do catastrophic damage to the nation of Japan. Please resolve this quickly, before that can happen."

"I'll do anything if you're willing to pay for it."

The parachute down was of course a one-way ticket. If I screwed up, they wouldn't be retrieving me. The mountain was surrounded by zombies and there were no blind spots in any direction. In fact, if the number of zombies continued growing at an accelerated rate, they would cover the entirety of Japan, so "running away" quickly lost all meaning.

Even so, I left the young lady's room and walked to the cargo room with its decompression equipment.

It wasn't that I was filled with righteousness or revenge.

It was simply that I risked my life on my jobs more often than not.

The zombie panic may have looked like the end of the world to some, but it only looked a little more exciting than a normal day for me.

"…"

The Sunekosuri had fallen silent at my feet, but he wasn't simply afraid of the zombies down below.

"What is it? Thinking of your estranged wife?"

"I had always assumed Ohatsu had been dragged into the darkness of this small field. That's why I charged head-first into it in order to find her when she suddenly disappeared," intermittently explained the Sunekosuri. "But she herself was a great darkness. She worked with Majina-sama, became the deepest portion of Hyakki Yakou, and now had a hand in this evil! My goal is no longer to rescue my wife. Even if it means sacrificing myself!!"

"Oryah."

I stepped lightly on the stuffed animal Youkai and he gave a cute "bgyuh!!" cry just as he put on a serious expression.

Yes, yes. That's the Sunekosuri I know.

"You're a harmless Youkai, so stop trying to act like the grim reaper. Making people pay for their crimes is the young lady's job. We're just her arms and legs, so we don't need to worry about it."

"But she is my family!! That means I have to take responsibility!!"

"Do you put your personal feelings ahead of your work? The young lady hired me to swiftly end this zombie panic. To be blunt, I'm not about to bring along someone dulled by personal feelings. It'll get in the way of our work."

"…"

"And on the other hand, how about I use personal feelings to motivate you? Why do you think your son Gisuke-chan has been hanging around the young lady so much?"

"Hm? Because Hafuri-sama is showing unwarranted kindness by looking after him?"

"No. Because he's stopping by every day, begging her to save his mom."

The young lady would have to face her own parents too. If only she would be so cutely honest, I might feel a little more motivated. Was she insistent on wearing those depressing mourning clothes because she was *stubbornly* insisting that the mourning period was not over until the ghosts had vanished? Then again, it was also cute how she was desperately trying to hold all that in.

Now.

It wasn't my job to transform that "kind noise" into power. I always dealt with the dirty jobs. I had to dryly, digitally, and assuredly resolve this problem.

Part 2

It was already pitch black outside.

The pure white snow covering the ground made it difficult to tell how far away it was.

Plus, the geothermal power plant on the slope stood out far more than the winding road or the mountain peak. It was small, so it may have been an experiment in the environmental energy and smart power systems that were all the rage lately. I could feel my eyes being drawn to it which would probably make me miss my target.

Breaking your legs right off the bat was about as stupid as it could get, but it was a pretty common problem on battlefields. I carefully landed on the snow with the Sunekosuri in my arms.

The Yozakura strengthened my joints, but it provided no defense against the cold. If not for my bodily modifications, the cold would have been unbearable.

Bozen City apparently followed an old tradition of height equaling social status, but that made the peak a strange place for this strange dog square.

I cut away the parachute, lowered the Sunekosuri to my feet, and asked a question.

"Now then, Sunekosuri. Based on Hyakki Yakou's analysis of a few zombies, this zombie panic has a lot to do with a Youkai known as the Kasha. So what is a Kasha?"

"Um, isn't it a cat Youkai surrounded by fire? I think it creates a gust of wind that blows open a coffin and steals sinners' corpses from the funeral or grave to eat their organs or something."

"Yes, that's one legend, but that one only started in the Edo period. In the oldest legends, it's a burning chariot in Buddhism. It's said to be a type of Oni that carries the dead down to the depths of the earth."

"Huh? But I kind of think there were other legends too."

"Well, the Kasha has gotten mixed together with the Bakeneko as time has passed. Some stories say corpses begin to move when the Kasha approaches, but you can think of that as a mixture with the Bakeneko's stories. *The trait is still just as effective, though.*"

Now, which image of the Kasha was Majina using? He had apparently rearranged a Sunekosuri named Ohatsu into an "original darkness" and used her for both offense and defense, so he could easily use the image from any era. He could probably swap out the Youkai's powers and traits by the era as easily as switching a bicycle's gears.

"Does that mean the zombie panic comes from the sinner's corpses?"

"Well, there are a few different theories as to how the Kasha steals the corpses. Sometimes the Youkai directly carries them away and sometimes the corpses move on their own when it approaches."

"The latter sounds exactly like a zombie."

"But there weren't any legends about it spreading from corpse to corpse."

"Then did he change something there?"

"Also, the Kasha doesn't control just any corpse. It has to be a sinner's corpse. …But what is a sin? This is focused on Bozen City, Mt. Boseki, and Mikuchi-sama, so that question has to be related to the rules here. I want to investigate that."

"What do you need for that?"

"The dog square at the peak. Those buildings seem to be guarding the Mikuchi-sama pit, so they smell fishy to me."

The wind seemed to cut through the dark night as we trudged through the still snow, crossed the broken fence, and approached the small cluster of one-story buildings.

I saw no sign of human guards, sensors, or traps.

I smashed the lock, walked in, and found a large empty space. There was no heater or lights. I thought for a bit before turning on a penlight and looking around.

"Was this a stable?"

“Most likely.”

The inside was clean. There were no dog droppings or even any shed fur. It didn’t even smell of animals. It was simply a large concrete structure with rows of chains and latches meant for holding animals.

The Sunekosuri followed the path of the penlight and read off the name plates above the cells.

“Jirou, Hanako, Honoka, Hitomi, Taichi… Hmm, they sound more like cow names than dog names.”

“I know.”

I lowered the penlight to the floor where I found some glittering silver metal.

“*But I doubt they would put handcuffs on a cow.*”

At first, the Sunekosuri did not move in the slightest.

Finally, he started to tremble and then looked around again.

“Wait…please wait! Then…you mean…this place was holding…”

“Yup.”

“Humans!? All of those nameplates were for humans!?”

Now, then.

Where had they gotten those humans from?

Part 3

The entire dog square facility was deserted.

I checked inside the residence for workers, but it was covered in dust and clearly didn't have anyone living in it. However, I did find a few interesting documents inside the rooms that had lost their owner's scent.

"Looks like this was officially a shrine, not a dog square. The workers were viewed as Shinto priests. The place was registered as a religious organization and even received grant money every year."

"A shrine? What kind of god did they worship?"

"Mikuchi-sama, of course."

I tapped at the bundle of old Japanese paper.

"This mountain is actually a dormant volcano and there's a huge pit below the peak. Long ago, there was a famine and the city at the base was littered with corpses, but they apparently managed to prevent the spread of disease by throwing the corpses into the hole."

"And they eventually started worshiping the hole as a god?"

"It's a little unclear whether the hole itself is the god or if they're worshiping the dead they threw in so they wouldn't hold a grudge. But things got weird as time passed. They apparently started throwing the badly injured, living criminals, and political enemies into the hole."

"So anyone who disturbed society, tripped them up, got in the way, or were just too much trouble ended up in that category?"

"They were selfishly referred to as sinners."

That established a link to the Kasha incident.

The Kasha stole sinners' corpses or made them move when it got close. That was all it originally did, but Mikuchi-sama rules branded any corpses or injured people as sinners. In other words, if you were critically wounded in a zombie attack, you would be infected with the “sinner” label.

“I still don’t believe it. And what about that stable? If they had a cycle built up to throw the village’s rejects into the hole, they wouldn’t need to capture them and raise them, would they?”

The Sunekosuri did not seem particularly angry. He simply sounded sick of how the human mind came up with these ideas.

However, it may have been a truly strange vision for the four-legged Youkai.

“It’s not that unusual. Sunekosuri, are you familiar with the sacrificial process?”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“There are sacrificial ceremonies all across the world, but they tend to follow a few similar steps.”

I raised my fingers with the penlight hand.

“The original deaths are generally coincidental. Someone collapses during a drought and then it rains, so people start to think there’s a connection between the dead and the rain.”

“…”

“But next time, they try to recreate it. They check to see if killing someone makes it rain. If another coincidence occurs, there’s no stopping it. Once it’s deemed cause and effect, they’ll end up killing people as offerings on a yearly or monthly basis.”

“Are you saying that has something to do with this Mikuchi-sama?”

“This is a sacrifice too. Since they threw the corpses in to prevent the spread of disease, they could think disease will never happen if they keep throwing corpses in. It could even reach the point that they think the hole itself will spew out disease if they stop doing it. That kind of misunderstanding was pretty common in the days before knowledge of germs. Who they throw in can end up expanding because they can’t find any corpses and they have to choose sinners from the living humans instead.”

“Then those people in the stable…”

“Once the sacrificial ceremony is established, the people will think they need a sacrifice, but they won’t want to be chosen themselves. Since they can’t ignore the ceremony, they start viewing the sacrifices as something special. They’ll say the more noble the person, the more the god will be pleased. That way they can push the role onto someone other than themselves. They’ll create a system that raises sacrifices cut off from the normal world. They don’t have to know about them and can smoothly offer up complete strangers without feeling anything for them.”

“Ah.”

“When that desire to not be chosen continues further, they end up making dolls out of paper, wood, wheat, or corn, but it looks like Mikuchi-sama never made it that far. They raised people in the dog square and offered them up when needed. Since it came from a desire to not be chosen, they might have focused on capturing travelers.”

After some more searching, we found something odd in the pet food processing building.

It had a tiled floor, a stainless steel work table, and a bunch of spinning blades in one place (much like a sawmill’s circular saw or band saw) for what may have been a mixer or disposer. It wasn’t exactly pleasant imagining *what* had been carried by the gears and conveyer belt to be disposed of, but the problem lay beyond it.

Behind a thick metal door, I found a stairway leading into the darkness underground. A thick shimenawa was hung over the top of the entrance and the stench of dirt rose from within.

And to top it all off was the family crest of Hyakki Yakou…no, of the young lady’s bloodline.

It was thirty centimeters across and about eight centimeters thick. It was made of pure gold and hanging from the center of the shimenawa.

“Ohatsu,” muttered the Sunekosuri. “Ohatsu had a hand in something like this while working with Majina-sama?”

“Who can say?”

I neither confirmed nor denied that uncertain fact, but I did speculate based on what I had seen.

"But Majina's group may not have been running this facility."

"?"

"There was no human smell in that stable and the residence was covered in a fair bit of dust. The magazines and calendars sitting around didn't have dates more recent than about ten years ago. Now, what happened then?"

"Jinnai Shinobu interfered with Majina-sama's group in the past?"

"I don't know if it was for the Kasha, to use Mikuchi-sama, or just because they wanted a hideout. It's true they set their sights on this place, but based on the old dates, there's a possibility they took over the dog square and drove out the original owners."

"B-but you're just guessing, right?"

"Then how about an interesting piece of information to back that up? Sunekosuri, based on the documents, this place was managed by someone named Sudou Taichi. Does that sound familiar?"

"?"

"*I'm pretty sure one of the nameplates in the stable said Taichi.*"

Someone had pretended to be a Shinto priest while abducting people and raising them like animals. What kind of revenge had the head of Japan's greatest occult organization taken on them?

People on the underside of society loved that kind of thing, so it had probably been quite thorough.

"Th-then Mikuchi-sama was cleaned up once Majina-sama arrived?"

"At the very least, the sacrificial process may have advanced to the era of paper and wheat dolls instead of human sacrifices," I agreed. "But make no mistake. Advancing the sacrificial process means the ceremony has been refined just as much. And after ten years of that, it led to a zombie panic spreading across Japan. Cleaned up? That's exactly right. The imperfect threat was perfected into a stable weapon."

What lay ahead was a darkness much deeper than the dog square.

If this was enough to shock him, then the rest would squeeze at his heart.

Are you ready, Sunekosuri?

We're about to visit a true hell. If you still wish for salvation, then you can't just cling to the truth. You need to have the guts to grab your wife's hand and pull her out of this muddy truth.

Part 4

The wind roared.

The giant pit seemed to continue forever. It was over twenty meters wide and I didn't want to think about how deep it was. The dirt and stone had been dug into to construct buildings and complex passageways all around the hole. Overall, it looked like a bunch of rundown shacks in a slum with wooden and bamboo scaffolding connecting them like narrow bridges.

They must have had no intention of hiding it because the thousand-year-old Hyakki Yakou emblem was burned into the wood all over.

Mikuchi-sama was filled with orange light. There were bare lightbulbs as well as candles and hanging lanterns. The lanterns used a wick soaked in a plate of oil rather than a candle.

As we descended, we generally circled around the large hole. It felt like walking along a coil or a spring.

"This is where Majina-sama's group was?"

"You could call it their hideout, their secret base, or their zombie laboratory."

There were damp spots here and there, but that may have been due to a nearby water vein or spring.

In addition to the shacks and scaffolding, there was a lot of digging equipment. This ranged from handheld equipment like shovels, pickaxes, and hammers to heavy machinery like a bulldozer and a power shovel. Wooden boxes were casually stuffed full of cylinders that probably had explosives inside.

They didn't seem to have many subordinates, so had Majina and Shikimi tied a headband around their forehead and dug out the cave themselves? It sounded like everyone had it rough.

"But when creating a secret base, how you dispose of the dirt you've dug out is the trickiest part. They did that and lived here for ten years without the slightest whisper reaching the outside world, so they really are monsters. I can't believe it."

“?”

The shacks had been given more and more rooms like a reckless stack of containers. I peeked inside one and saw a tatami mat room beyond wooden bars crisscrossing horizontally and vertically.

“Is that a cell?”

“Hm.”

I grabbed a voice recorder hanging on the scaffolding’s bamboo railing. It was as blatant as everything else. I hit the play button with my thumb and heard Majina’s voice beyond some static.

“Every time I see them, the relics of our supposed ‘glory days’ make me sick. But I can never regain the lost methods to develop a Zashiki Warashi without following in their footsteps.”

I listened while walking along and came across a slightly smaller cell. Further along, I found an even smaller one. As I kept walking, I found more and more, each smaller than the last.

“If they stripped a Zashiki Warashi bare and had their way with her in the name of research, then they were, without a doubt, monsters. But in their own monstrous way, they would be treating the Youkai the same as us through their lust. But what they did was different. In a way, they were far more awful than mere monsters.”

“W-wait a second,” said the Sunekosuri with fear in his voice. “What is this…!?”

The box in front of us was large enough to hold in your arms. If I were to climb inside, I would have to squeeze inside while holding my knees in my arms. Shrinking it any further could easily break all of the bones in one’s body and leave only a lump of flesh behind.

But…

It went further…

“They did not even view Youkai as beings with a body and mind of their own. They viewed them as mere phenomena that happened to speak the same language as us and act on the same thoughts as us.”

The next box was downright tiny.

Each side was at most thirty centimeters across. It would be perfect for holding a birthday present.

“What they did was simple. They prepared a cell to rob the Youkai of their freedom. Next, they moved them to cages that gradually restricted their ability to live their lives. They could not eat, they could not sleep, they could barely walk around, they had no way of knowing the time, and eventually it was too small to fit inside. By letting them gradually grow accustomed to each step along the way, the Youkai would lose their body and mind. They would return to being a mere phenomenon.”

“What was…inside this?”

The Sunekosuri gulped as he asked.

There was only one Zashiki Warashi that Hyakki Yakou had done anything to.

The surface of the box had a number blotted out with ink and “Ver. 40” was written next to it.

“But…this is…but!? How much would a humanoid Youkai have to lose their humanoid form to fit inside this thirty centimeter box!?”

This was a museum of the truth behind the “glory days” of Hyakki Yakou several centuries ago. Majina had recreated it using immense amounts of data and his own definite skill.

But unlike a Western wax figure museum with a torture theme, this was not an accurate model meant to point out the mistakes of the past and warn the present.

“Yes, and what makes me sick most of all,” spat out the voice, *“is that I’m so worthless that I need something like this.”*

“He’s even more insane than I thought,” I summed up while stopping the voice recorder.

Leaving all the documents out in the open both here and in the dog square up above had not been carelessness. It had likely been an attempt to confess. But rather than tell someone, he had found meaning in letting it out of his heart in some way or another. It may have been a lot like the story of King Midas and the donkey’s ears.

“Basically, he made a wax figure torture museum, made his own personal customizations, and then threw his wife, that white Zashiki Warashi, into it. And that created the Ver. 40 that surpasses the

Ver. 39. Maybe it's like sitting around on a sofa made of human skin."

"Wh-what was Majina-sama trying to do?"

"That I can't tell you yet."

For ten years, Majina and Mei had watched the world continue under the assumption they were dead. Who could say how much that had broken them?

I couldn't tell what they wanted from the Ver. 40 or the zombie panic.

I couldn't see any direct connection to his apparent goal of taking Hyakki Yakou from the young lady.

Or rather…

"He supposedly has a Zashiki Warashi that can construct a brand new destiny from nothing rather than change the existing destiny. If he has that, then he wouldn't need to bother with all this. He could directly mess with the world to make himself Hyakki Yakou's leader."

"Th-then is the Ver. 40…um, Mei-san not complete yet?"

"Do you really think Majina would be that inept?"

Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi was complete. He could use it at any time and he had no reason to hesitate. Nevertheless, they never used that power to put us in checkmate.

Why?

"No, that isn't it."

"?"

"Maybe he's already using it. And for something *that makes his return to Hyakki Yakou a secondary concern in comparison.*"

"What would-…?"

The Sunekosuri trailed off because someone appeared from behind one of the complex shacks as if dragging their heavy bodies along.

There were two of them and they had huge chunks torn out of their shoulders, sides, and thighs.

“Eek!?”

The Sunekosuri shrieked, but not because these were zombies.

Every zombie had been a human at first.

But the identity of these two zombies was a surprise.

“Uchimaku Hayabusa and Hishigami Enbi…? But, eh? But…it can’t be…!?”

“Did they sniff out this incident like normal but were knocked out of the running? Honestly, there’s no saving them when they take it this far.”

When their blank eyes spotted us…or rather, spotted some *fresh flesh that had yet to rot*, they turned their heads our way. They had torn clothing, dry white hair, and red and purple mottled skin. With their tongues hanging out and their heads lolling weakly, they barely looked like their former selves.

“Is this any time to remain calm!? What do we do? How do we save them!?”

“Save them? How?”

“What?”

“I’ll save them if I can. I’m willing to be flexible when it comes to family. But I’m pretty sure this is a lost cause. I may be able to restore or swap out body parts to a certain extent, but not even I can save a brain that’s already rotted away.”

“Th-then what do we do?”

“There’s only one thing to do.”

I clenched and opened my hand.

I focused on the idea of a beast’s claws.

“Whoever they were originally, an enemy has appeared before my eyes. I’m not going to be nonsensically sentimental and say I want to destroy my family with my own hands. I’m just going to defeat them and move on.”

“…………………………………………………………………………………………

And Enbi.

You didn’t release your Hishigami Woman side even with that going on?

She was second to none when it came to human opponents. Even if it meant eventually standing before that detective as the worst possible murderer, she might have been able to save him from the zombies “for the time being” if she had released that side of herself.

Or maybe she decided she would rather die by his side.

“Come here, *human*.”

It felt so empty.

Not sad, but empty. That was how I felt about a world with nothing but sacrifice.

“I’ll bury you with that man you loved. Maybe that will make up for the sin of killing my family.”

She replied with a roar.

Both of them charged forward in perfect unison. Based on the speed and strength, they were probably about the same as a three hundred kilogram grizzly. A normal human wouldn’t have stood a chance, but I was an exception.

I would decapitate one with my first strike and behead the other a moment later.

As soon as I planned out that accurate course, something else happened.

Suddenly, a great power struck those full-power monsters and they crumbled to the ground.

No one had touched them.

It was blatantly paranormal, as if a shockwave had forced them down from every direction.

“What a pain.”

I heard a voice from overhead.

A woman said to have overdone her anti-aging to the point of shrinking stood on the wood and bamboo scaffolding arrayed in three dimensions. She had long white hair that seemed out of place on what otherwise looked like a girl. The hair was worn up like a giant flower, she wore a colorless white kimono, and she used a shimenawa in place of a sash. Stabbed in the ground was a golden three-pronged vajra that glittered to an ominous extent.

“I thought I’d warned you not to justify the killing that really comes from your own weakness, final generation.”

“Hishigami…Shikimi!?”

After those words, all illumination vanished from the large underground space: the bare lightbulbs, the candles, and the hanging lanterns. Like a switch had been thrown, everything went dark.

“…!! I had a feeling you’d do that!!”

I relied on my memories to grab a shovel that had been leaning up against a shack’s wall. I swung it around and it must have struck the three-pronged vajra she had apparently picked back up because orange sparks flew.

One of the hanging lanterns must have spilled its plate of oil because a flame burst out.

The flames and oil fell to the ground and then spread to the surrounding shacks and cells.

My eyes met those of a young face illuminated by scarlet flames.

The careless Sunekosuri was still at my feet, so I kicked him back with my heel. Hishigami Shikimi was the oldest and leading killer of Youkai. When she faced a Youkai, it was harder for her *not* to kill it.

Shikimi’s white hair spread out.

The next thing I knew, she had removed the top of her kimono, revealing an undershirt and bare shoulders.

The poisonous flower had become a dangerous and deadly fruit.

“I had a feeling you would come here, but did you really think the final generation could hope to match the founder of the Hishigami line!?”

“I had a feeling you would be waiting here. But did you really think an ancient one-trick-pony could stay at the top forever!?”

Nothing more was necessary.

This battle had been decided before it began, so the two Hishigamis obeyed the pre-established harmony and clashed.

Part 5

During the final stage of the conflict between Hyakki Yakou and the Aoandon's group, Hishigami Shikimi had mocked me as an expert bluffer with no other skills. I had been completely at her mercy. She had been holding back, yet I had not even lasted three minutes.

However, that was not because her bones or muscles were extremely strong.

"Hh!!"

In the conflagration, Shikimi twisted her hips inside the white kimono. The golden three-pronged vajra in her hand fell like lightning. No matter where I ran, *I would be forced to the ground like Enbi and the detective had been.*

That was not what I needed to do.

I twisted my own body around and used the great strength I had acquired from the technology of those sickening Hishigami Men. And it was all to swing my shovel down.

I half-forcibly destroyed the ground at my feet, creating a crack between Shikimi and me.

That was all I did, yet it stopped Shikimi's attack.

"Oh?"

"You're the Hishigami Woman that specializes in combat. None of your attack methods are going to require targeting each individual person!!"

"So what!?"

She swung the vajra and I blocked its tip with the metal part of the shovel. Orange sparks flew.

I immediately noticed something invisible covering the surface of the shovel, as if crawling up the wooden handle from the point of contact.

I quickly let go and grabbed a hammer that was as long as a wooden sword. I swung it to smash the mysteriously infected shovel in midair.

A bursting sound came after a short delay.

“Your method is a terrain effect. It’s probably something like the ‘fill’ tool in image editing software. You desecrate a surface based on the points of contact to remake it into your own field. Then you can freely influence any object, phenomenon, or life form in that field. Since you’re using a three-pronged vajra, I’m guessing it’s based on Kobo Daishi’s Flying Vajra. In that story, he threw a three-pronged vajra to determine the proper site for his headquarters and it stabbed into Mt. Koya!!”

So if there was a crack in the ground, the “fill” would be interrupted.

So if I stuck the shovel in the way before it hit me, the target of the “fill” would change.

While I had strengthened my physical body to face Youkai, she created a “killing territory” that weakened her target.

Under the right conditions, this could cover an entire city or region at once. Then she could instantly kill every single soldier standing there. Even if a 6000 shots per minute Vulcan cannon or a cruise missile were fired her way, she could shoot them down, break them apart, remake them, destroy them, or neutralize them. She specialized in taking on large groups and her firepower was so great that accurately targeting a single person was difficult.

But that didn’t mean she was an immortal monster with no blind spots.

If I didn’t mess up my response, I could avoid an instant death!

“You can only rest easy when you’re looking down on everyone else, so I’m surprised you did so much research. How humiliating was it to realize the truth is much more useful then lies?”

I ignored her and threw the giant hammer at her.

The blunt weapon rotated horizontally, but she made no move to avoid it.

“But have you forgotten? The Flying Vajra covers a surface based on the points of contact, but why does that have to be limited to the ground?”

“Kh.”

“And I rule over a territory, not the land itself. *In other words, my rule extends to the airspace directly above that surface as well.*”

As soon as I threw the hammer, I forced myself into a leap despite my unnatural stance. I felt my entire skeleton screaming in protest, but I had more to worry about. I left my body to the custom Yozakura that seemed like a creaking mass of rubber and springs.

After all, Hishigami Shikimi had slammed her vajra into the wall of a shack.

A dull sound burst out as the flying hammer crashed into that wall as if it had been pulled there by a powerful magnet. It also turned to stone. If I had stayed there, the same would have happened to me.

When she struck the ground, it affected the area above it.

When she struck the wall, it affected the area “above” it but in the horizontal direction…in other words, straight ahead.

It was like being targeted by the invisible spotlight of an electromagnetic weapon.

But what exactly was this attack based in?

Earth, ground, territory? No!

“A certain concept exists in almost every religion around the world.”

Shikimi slowly turned her gaze toward my airborne body.

“Namely, holy ground. Just like the land on which Kobo Daishi chose to build his headquarters. And what is the greatest power that ties people to the earth?”

I kicked left and right off the burning shack walls to escape upwards like a pinball.

“Tch. Universal gravitation!?”

“Precisely. As the planet pulls at us, we too pull at the planet. So you will pull power of this holy ground to yourself and cause it to burst inside your body. …No human body can escape the power of the planet itself.”

I could only remain airborne. My knees and hips were undamaged, so I had to praise the Yozakura suit. A head-on battle was not easy. The best plan was to escape outside the range of her “fill” and use my handgun or whatever else to snipe her from within the smoke!

But then Shikimi placed a hand on her hip and stared up at me.

“Did you think you could reach safety by fleeing high enough above the holy ground? But have you forgotten, final generation?”

“?”

“This is the depths of the earth. *It is a single space surrounded in all directions by dirt.*”

“…!!???”

The three-pronged vajra had left her hand.

She had thrown it to her feet where it stabbed into the ground.

An instant later, I heard a high-pitched sound and something invisible spread out in no time at all. Shikimi’s territory began at her feet, continued up the nearby wall, and instantly reached the darkness overhead. It was just like choosing the wrong spot and filling up the entire image.

This ridiculous universal gravity attack had me pull the planet’s disaster into myself and it rushed in at me from all 360 degrees.

Oh…

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

I could no longer worry about appearances.

I pulled a wooden charm doll from the open chest of the kunoichi suit and a line of light burst out as if slicing through space. I forcibly pulled out my Shikigami that wore a short kimono.

It was the Deadly Dragon Princess.

The artificial lifeform moved back-to-back with me.

The instant she showed any sign of movement, countless giant cracks ran through the entire underground space. Water poured out like a dam had burst and the solid bedrock crumbled. Cracks had cut apart and broken up Shikimi's territory.

Then the murderous amount of water swirled, became a great dragon, and rushed toward Shikimi.

“Did you mess with the water vein?”

The founder of the Hishigami line pulled the three-pronged vajra from the ground using its decorative thread and then grabbed it in one hand.

“But did you really think that would be enough to kill me?”

All sound vanished.

First, the Deadly Dragon Princess's fierce deluge froze over in an instant. As soon as the water dragon entered what little remaining territory she had, all of the water molecules froze in a chain reaction.

The crumbling underground space stopped moving, like instant glue had been dumped over everything.

But I had other things to worry about.

By the time I heard an explosion, Hishigami Shikimi was already five centimeters in front of my face with vajra in hand.

By the time I realized she had used her incredible leg strength to launch herself forward, she had taken her next action.

First, she kicked the Deadly Dragon Princess away. Like two balls on strings clacking together, the kinetic energy was transferred over and the Shikigami stabbed into the bedrock like a shell or a missile. I didn't have time to gasp. Shikimi spun around in midair and swung her three-pronged vajra down toward the center of my face!

“…!!!!!”

I immediately pulled my handgun from my boot, but the vajra shattered it. Not only that, I was forcibly slammed into the ground directly below me.

"Gah…ah…!?"

I broke through a shack wall, smashed a pile of wooden boxes, and rolled along the ground.

The damage to my body and the remaining moves I had in stock were of secondary importance.

Oh, no. This location is very, very bad!!

"That is my territory left over even after all those cracks. That is the holy ground determined by the vajra."

Something twisted near my spine, the contents of my head swelled up like a balloon, I felt like I was wrapped in intense heat, and I could not tell front from back, left from right, or even up from down. I frantically moved my arms and legs, but I could not stand up or even sit up.

Damn. Is this what they call an unexplainable fever?

It was a stereotypical form of divine punishment or curse. It was the judgment given to those who rudely violated divine land.

"If you wouldn't get inside, all I had to do was throw you inside myself."

I heard a soft sound as Hishigami Shikimi belatedly landed.

She spun the three-pronged vajra like a baton and slowly walked over.

Things were not looking good. The inside of my head was boiling and I was having trouble figuring out which way her voice was coming from.

"What are you trying to do…with all that power?"

"If you see Majina as an insane man trying to overthrow the country, you wouldn't understand. He is a normal human being. Although that is exactly why he broke."

"…"

"Even after marrying his wife and having a child, the Zashiki Warashi was nothing more than a Zashiki Warashi. Mei could not escape her primary objective of bringing her family prosperity. At the same time, Majina was brought to despair by his own talent. Without him, he felt Mei never would have suggested modifying her body into the Ver. 40. Without him, he felt things would have turned out differently. But they had everything necessary to bring further prosperity. The situation pushed at his back, Mei took his hand, and he fell straight into hell. What if he had forcibly rejected it? That's simple. A Zashiki Warashi will naturally leave a family that does not desire prosperity. In other words, she would have abandoned him. Her feelings as an individual were irrelevant. It came down to her trait as a species. Majina had no other option."

So the Zashiki Warashi who had fallen in love with a human had thrown her own body into the compressor.

She had shaken off the hands of the man who wanted to see that least of all and she had taken the shortest route to prosperity.

It was a revoltingly awful form of "happiness".

But…

"That explains Majina and the Ver. 40's situation." I took a slow breath and shook my hazy mind. "But what threat do they see coming? What threat *do they think they need the Ver. 40 to face*? And how does that connect to this zombie panic? I'm curious about all that as well, but that isn't what I'm asking. …What do you gain by following Majina? If you just want success as a Hishigami Woman, you wouldn't need to go along with all this."

She did not answer my question.

In my blurry vision, I thought I saw the white-haired woman form a slight smile as she looked down at me.

She prepared to swing down the golden three-pronged vajra.

"Sweet dreams, final generation. This is the end, Hishigami Woman who only wanted success on an individual level."

"Shut it, you old hag. Your loss was set in stone from the moment you didn't kill me the instant you had the chance."

"?"

This isn't one of those bluffs you say I love so much.

Have you forgotten?

We're surrounded by the sea of flames created from the fallen lanterns spreading to the shacks and cells.

And I just destroyed a bunch of wooden boxes when you threw me to the ground.

Now, what had I seen in boxes much like these on my way here?

The answer is blasting explosives.

A deafening roar and shockwave exploded from nearby. I could barely move and Shikimi was standing boldly above me, but we were both blown away. We were thrown through the air as if gravity had vanished.

This is no longer your world.

We've left it.

"Damn…you!?"

She spun around and tried to throw her vajra, but it was too late.

Before she could, I grabbed at her shoulders in midair. My thumb traced along her slender collarbone and then forcibly grabbed it. It broke with a dry sound.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

One of her arms was unusable.

The vajra slipped from her hand and vanished into the pitch black abyss.

We crashed into the roof of a different shack a good distance away. I couldn't breathe, but I raised two fingers on my right hand. We had escaped her territory and the mysterious fever was gone. I held her to the ground and our arms quickly crossed paths as we targeted each other's vitals.

The air audibly split apart.

My fingers stabbed into her throat and her finger slipped just past my temple.

"Gah…gh…?"

She looked up at me with a look of surprise.

Her mouth flapped like a goldfish's and she forced her voice out with her windpipe mostly crushed.

"You…"

"?"

"You might know…all you can do…is destroy…but did you never… wish…even once…*to be useful to someone*…?"

"Oh…"

So that was the founder of the Hishigami line's desire.

Had she wandered the world for a thousand years in search of nothing more than that?

But…

"I gave up on that less than a year after being born into this world."

Shikimi was approaching death, but her eyes widened for just an instant. At the very, very end, she utilized her muscles rather than beg for her life. She was not trying to escape and she was not trying to get back up.

She was going to kill me.

She was going to kill the target before her eyes.

Because she believed that would be useful to someone.

Even as a Hishigami Woman, she wanted just one person in this wide world to say "thank you".

But you know what?

That's why this happened, old lady.

I didn't win because I specialize in bluffing. Nor because I had prepared everything in advance.

It was much simpler. The Hishigami Women summon disaster.

So much so that you had to wish to be useful.

“That’s why I won’t die.”

“!?”

“And that’s why you won’t be useful to anyone. Not ever.”

That was the difference between the founder and the final generation.

There was no point in discussing who was right. I dug my two fingers deeper into her throat to destroy both her windpipe and the medulla oblongata sticking down into her neck.

A wet sound burst out.

There was a winner and a loser.

Unfortunately, those were the only two categories in our world.

Part 6

Hishigami Shikimi, founder of the Hishigami line, had ceased to function.

The flower bore fruit and then withered away. The white hair was spread out around the small body that would never move again. I rolled off of her and onto the roof. I couldn’t stop myself, so I slid right off the roof and onto the dirt ground.

“Kh…”

I couldn’t feel my legs.

The bones had apparently been taken out when I had blown myself away with the explosives.

I guess not even the Yozakura’s support was enough for that. I’m going to need my kit to repair myself. If I inject the medicinal liquid to set the bones and add a wooden splint on the outside, maybe I can stand.

Just as I was thinking that…

“I can’t believe we actually lost Shikimi-san here.”

Even I felt a chill down my spine.

I couldn’t move my broken legs, so I forced my head up while crawling along and found a long-haired man in a monocle and the kind of suit seen in paintings from the Meiji period. He held a Sunekosuri in his arm like a pet-lover. Standing next to him was an unemotional Zashiki Warashi in a pure white yukata, with a head mounted display hanging from her neck and with half her face hidden by a veil. The monocle and veil made it hard to tell, but they both had different colored eyes. More specifically, they had both swapped an eye for a human and Youkai eyeball each.

One was the Sunekosuri named Ohatsu.

One was the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi.

And the last was a man with a full family crest on his chest.

“Majina!?”

"I hadn't been too worried since she had already lived for a thousand years, but I suppose everything eventually meets its end. Even the prosperous inevitably decay. Don't you think that is the worst Japanese saying of them all? Can't anyone reject that awful tendency?"

This was not good.

It was possible I could *heal* my legs with my kit, but he would never give me the chance. On his own, he could rival the current Hyakki Yakou and he also had the Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi who could create the world's destiny from nothing. If I was faced with something like that when I couldn't even stand up, there was no way I could win.

Then what was I supposed to do? Try to rely on someone else? The Sunekosuri was out of the question and I had no idea what had happened to the Deadly Dragon Princess after she was blown away by Shikimi. That meant she was out of my control and I couldn't use her.

Wait.

Does that mean…

There really is nothing I can do!?

"What..?"

"Yes?"

"What are you trying to do? No, what are you trying to cause? I can't figure out why you would start this zombie panic. With the Ver. 40, you should be able to directly create your utopia without going through all this troublesome work… So why aren't you using the Ver. 40. Could it be that…"

"You Hishigami Women like to stall for time by talking and to wait for an opening when the thread of tension grows slack."

"Could it be that you aren't holding back on the Ver. 40. Could it be that you're already using it for something else? If so, what are you using it for? No, what is the true problem that you couldn't find a solution for without using the Ver. 40!?"

"Well, the Kasha Package – what you're calling the zombie panic –

is just a way of raising the standard.”

Raising the standard?

I looked confused and Majina continued while petting Ohatsu the Sunekosuri.

“Needless to say, the seeds have already been sown in thirteen cities of five different regions. As time passes, the saturation point will be reached and zombies will cover the archipelago in no time. But turning 150 million people into zombies is only setting the stage.”

He made it sound so simple.

Normally, hearing about the collapse of an entire nation would be enough to feel faint, but we were looking at something beyond even that.

“Needless to say, humans gain a much more powerful body when they become zombies. And the effect isn’t as noticeable, but as they bite people, creating second and third generations of zombies, the zombies gradually start retaining their rational mind. …Eventually, they are no different than when they were alive.”

He was strengthening the entire population of Japan.

On top of that, he could control the core of the Kasha Package, to manage the wills of everyone who had become a zombie without even realizing it. He was raising the standard so all those harmless civilians could survive in our professional world.

It almost sounded like…

“Are you trying to start a war?”

“*If a one-on-one conflict can be called a war, then one has been ongoing for ten years now.*”

I had no idea what he meant by that, but that was as far as he went.

“More importantly, you should probably be more worried about what happens to you.”

I immediately heard a raw and soft sound as something fell onto my back. It had fallen from the roof of the nearby shack. I thought for a moment, realized what it had to be, and felt sweat pouring from my body.

It was Hishigami Shikimi.

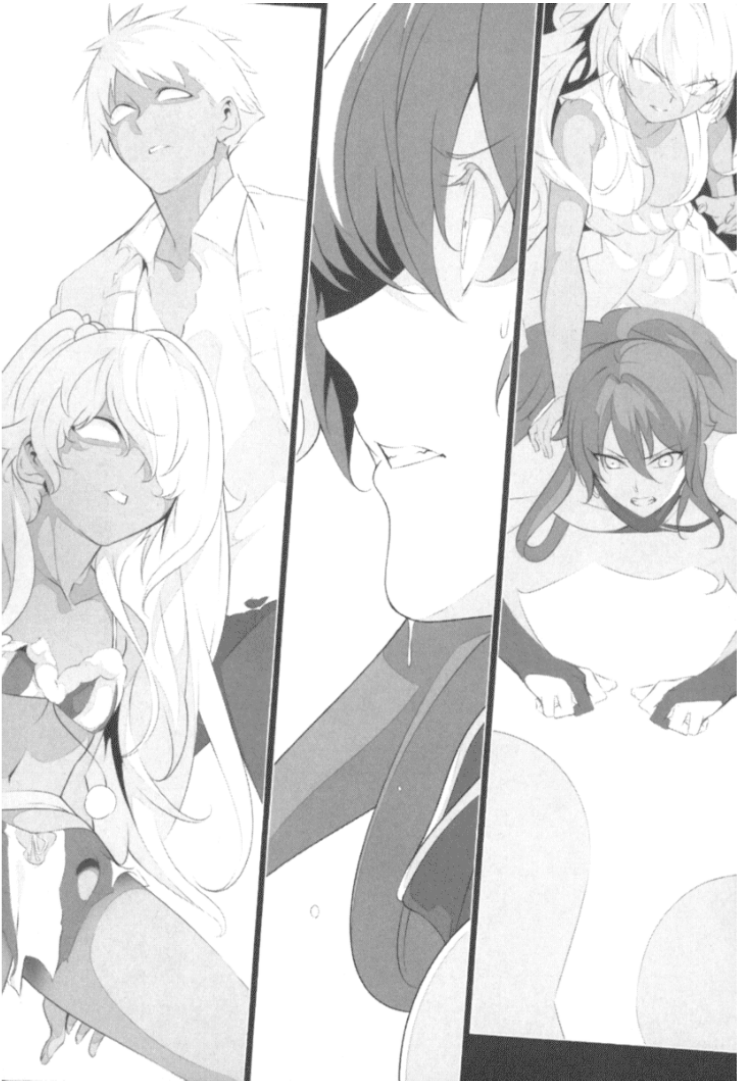
Her white hair was spread out and her shoulders were pushed far outside her kimono.

And her dead, discolored body was moving, which could only mean one thing.

"I'm sure you've investigated some things on the way here since I left some materials here and there. The Kasha controls the corpses of sinners when it approaches and the legend of Mikuchi-sama means any abandoned corpse or fatally wounded individual is labeled a sinner and thrown into the abyss. All in the name of preventing disease."

"Kh…"

"So what matters is the boundary between life and death. Being directly bitten by a zombie doesn't particularly matter. Of course, when you aren't bitten by a zombie, you start out as a first generation and don't retain much of your rational mind. Oh, to be honest, there was a risk of a Zashiki Warashi becoming a zombie as they're a collection of children sacrificed during famines and the like. I was afraid that might happen here since Mei could only become the ideal Zashiki Warashi, but she's just fine. Just as you would expect of the ideal."



If the dead became zombies regardless of how they died, what did that mean about Hishigami Shikimi now?

“And Shikimi-san isn’t the only one who became a zombie.”

Two new threats appeared from behind the building.

It was the man and girl zombies who had been freed of the bonds placed on them by Hishigami Shikimi’s attack.

They had white hair, muddy eyes, and skin covered in red and purple. The detective’s cardigan and slacks were stained red and one of my sister’s twintails was roughly undone.

Majina stepped aside as if to clear the way for them.

He smiled and spoke.

“Until we meet again. Although it’s hard to say whether you will be alive or dead when that happens.”

Several hands and mouths approached the living flesh that could not move.

There was nothing I could do.

There was nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing nothing

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Chapter 4: Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi by ???

Part 1 (3rd person)

Time will now shift back by about half a day.

The stage returns to the old Japanese-style house partway up Mt. Boseki in Bozen City.

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata appeared before Jinnai Shinobu and Nagisa. As an aggregation of the children who had lost their lives in infanticides during famines and the like, she had shown her new face as a zombie.

Part 2

I heard a bestial growling.

I slowly, slowly turned around and saw the Zashiki Warashi in her red yukata.

She crushed the branch cutter in her fist, tossed it aside, and stared at me.

Her hair was still a glossy black and her skin looked pure enough to repel water.

The problem was her eyes.

They had the same muddy look as the zombies scattered through the city.

Those eyes clearly viewed me as her prey.

“Ah.”

That was the limit.

As soon as an instinctual tremor raced up my spine, the last bit of rationality burned away within me.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

I screamed and broke through the sliding screen to escape. I scrambled so quickly I nearly tripped, but I desperately maintained my balance and ran through the very, very large tatami-covered hall.

I heard a bursting sound directly behind me.

When I looked back, there were tears in the corners of my eyes.

She really was a wild animal. That red animal had lost all dignity as she ran after me on all fours. I felt as hopeless as someone who had run across a bear on a mountain trail. The Zashiki Warashi caught up in no time and stood up on her legs for free use of her arms.

“…!!???”

Rather than consciously dodging, my legs gave out and I fell to the tatami mats.

Nevertheless, it was effective. Something tore through the air even more intensely than a metal bat. The rectangular wooden column by the wall really did break as easily as chopsticks.

"…"

Her eyes rolled in her head to view me.

A single blow and it would all be over. I knew that, but I couldn't stand up!!

"Ah, ah, ah, ah, ah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?"

I crawled backwards while still looking the Zashiki Warashi's way. I broke through another sliding screen to enter the wood-floored hallway. I felt something metallic behind me blocking my way. The Zashiki Warashi took two or three steps toward me and swung her fist at me like an artillery shell.

I did not have time to carefully analyze every little thing.

I simply rolled to the side to avoid the approaching blow and live even a second longer.

As soon as she missed, something collided with her. No, it captured her. It was the bear trap that had been among the hunting tools lined up in the hallway. It was basically a giant metal cage with a guillotine-style door that closed when the animal was lured inside by the bait.

The heavy cage bounced around with intense clanking sounds. As soon as the movement lessened, I finally ran toward the bear trap. It was a box with 150 cm sides. I grabbed the top and grabbed the guillotine-style door. After shaking its rails a little, I used all my strength to force it down.

Whether she had caught on or not, the Zashiki Warashi finally faced the door and shook it with both hands, but it did not look like she could break the trap.

Thankfully it had been designed for bears rather than deer or boars. As a zombie, she could break a solid column with a running start, but she may not have been able to wield all her strength inside the cramped space of the trap.

I finally let out a heavy sigh and sat on the hallway floor.

You Good-for-Nothing Youkai. Aren't you supposed to be the Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi that protects your family's good fortune? You really are useless. Why are you turning into the worst zombie of them all!?

When I viewed her again, it really did seem that her hair and skin had not changed like with the normal(?) zombies. Did that have to do with Youkai being immune to physical attacks?

"Shinobu-chan…"

After a short delay, Kitty Nurse Nagisa walked in with her pink knit dress, white cardigan, pinned-on hat, and tail accessory. As usual, she had a thin smile on her lips and held the thick cattle cleaver named Namagusa.

"Are you hurt?"

"No…"

Despite my answer, the situation was about as bad as it could get.

"Everyone from the cellphone shop is dead. That means we don't have any adults with us and the dump truck isn't any use anymore. Not to mention the Zashiki Warashi's like this. What are we supposed to do now?"

"About that…"

Nagisa tossed something to me.

It was a perfume bottle. Namely, the one Nozaki Haru had used for the rotting smell that kept the zombies from attacking.

"I know it might be hard to use someone you know, but shouldn't we test it out now that we have a zombie safely captured? It would be scary to see if the zombie bites or not when we're actually in danger. Eh heh heh. We get to work together again…"

"You're…right."

Even if we couldn't use the dump truck, there was nothing to be afraid of if the zombies wouldn't target us. We could freely move around on foot then. Using that troublesome Zashiki Warashi to test Nozaki Haru’s perfume wasn’t a bad idea.

“So do we use it just like normal perfume? Let’s rub some in on the blood vessels of our wrists and neck.”

“Wait, ew!? It really does smell like rotting garbage! We’re supposed to cover ourselves in this!?”

“Well, yes. It’s supposed to make us unappetizing to the zombies.”

The swarm of zombies was gone and we had captured the Zashiki Warashi alive.

With no immediate threat, we may have grown a little lax. Out of self-interest, we were happier that we had survived than we were worried about the deaths of people we knew. As we celebrated, we rubbed in the harsh smell that stung at our eyes.

“Ugh… Did Nozaki really smell like this?”

“She was surrounded by the zombies already, so who knows how she smelled.”

After our preparations were complete, we turned toward the Zashiki Warashi inside the metal cage.

I just hoped she had grown a little more docile.

“Shinobu-chan…”

“What?”

“It looks to me like she’s still rattling the cage like crazy. I’m pretty sure she’s trying to bite us.”

“Huh!? What’s going on!?”

Nozaki Haru had used this to move freely through the zombies like a clownfish among sea anemone. Nagisa and I had sprayed the perfume on ourselves, but it wasn’t working. The red yukata Youkai still had a lock on us.

“Was it more than just the perfume?”

“You mean like it has to be mixed with something else?”

If so, there was nothing we could do. We hadn't noticed anything else in her cloth pouch. It was possible we'd find some other bottle or sheet if we checked through her gruesome remains, but that wouldn't tell us what we were supposed to mix together or at what ratio. It was unlikely to simply be 1:1. It was the same as picking up an ATM card when you didn't know the PIN.

"So all we did was cover ourselves in this rotting stench?"

I threw the perfume bottle away in irritation.

We finally had no ideas left. The bear trap had small wheels and handles attached to safely transport the live bear, but walking through the mountain with that heavy cage would be too dangerous. It wasn't as bad as the flat urban area, but we already knew there were zombies wandering around here as well.

Things would have been a lot easier using the dump truck out front, but I didn't even have a driver's license for a motorcycle, not to mention a car. Trying to drive would be reckless enough under normal circumstances, but this was a large truck on a narrow, winding mountain road while it was snowing. The odds were pretty good that would end up with us falling right off a cliff.

"Shinobu-chan."

"What?"

"Let's take a short break. I want to eat while we have the chance. This is a normal house, so the contents of the fridge should be fine. Don't worry. I know how to win over my husband's stomach. Tee hee…"

"Eat? After seeing all that?"

"All what?"

Nagisa nonchalantly made her way to the kitchen. All alone, I faced the Zashiki Warashi through the cage. The Good-for-Nothing Youkai seemed to have learned she could not damage the bear trap no matter how much she pushed or pulled, so she started gnawing at its bars.

"Stop it, you idiot. Honestly, how could this happen?"

"Gau."

"Don't you gau me. I'll put a collar on you and keep you as a pet."

Meanwhile, Nagisa returned. She held a few cans of food, bottles of water, sweet breads, and packaged ham and kamaboko. By this point, I no longer cared that I was in someone else's home.

Reds and blacks covered the next room over and my clothes were covered in the stench of rotting garbage. My unease about the future weighed down on me. I was barely hungry, but I still nibbled at the edge of a ham slice. The single slice seemed to last forever. I eventually couldn't stand it anymore and threw the remaining half of the slice to the Zashiki Warashi in the cage.

She sniffed curiously at the ham, tried to bite at it while on all fours, had trouble, and finally used her fingers to bring it to her mouth. However, she seemed to be playing with it more than eating it. She sucked at the ham, bit at it, and spat it out once she was bored.

"Looks like it isn't just meat they want."

"Is what they're doing even 'eating'? It may be similar to how a baby puts everything that interests them in their mouth. It's just that the zombies pull at and bite at everything so strongly. Oh, dear. I'm talking with Shinobu-chan about babies…"

Nagisa sat in the hallway with her legs to the side and elegantly ate some stolen sweet bread. She seemed to be perfectly hungry and acting entirely normal for her.

After washing it down with some water from one of the bottles, she said more.

"Anyway, Shinobu-chan."

"Yeah?"

It was a casual suggestion.

However, I had forgotten something important. We had just walked through a hellish world filled with zombies and this was Nagisa I was talking to.

"How should we *dispose of* that Zashiki Warashi?"

……

I had been wrong.

I had been mistaken. A chilly draft instantly blew away the gentle warmth surrounding me. Dry reality erased the warm illusion. This was no time to be relaxing. I didn't have time to be taking a break. There were still a ton of problems to deal with and Nagisa was as much a threat as the zombies!!

"Wait, wait! Nagisa…what are you talking about?"

"Come on."

She sounded perfectly casual.

She faced the cage with a thin smile and an unreadable emotion in her eyes.

"We haven't heard anything about the zombies recovering. Why would it be any different for a Youkai?"

"…!!"

"So what are you going to do? Spend the rest of your life raising that Youkai in that cage? If you ever grew a little careless and got bitten, you could start a brand new zombie outbreak. It's true the Youkai herself suggests there's more to the spread than just biting, but it's still dangerous. …Besides, we don't even know what the zombies eat. It looks like she won't eat ham and we don't know if humans are their food or just something else they put in their mouths out of curiosity like a baby. …Hee hee. A baby. But what are you going to do after taking her back? Wait for her to wither away?"

Nagisa was as carefree as someone reading down a list in their notes, but those same words were wearing down my very soul.

"And the bear trap itself will deteriorate. You would eventually have to transfer her to a new cage, but you might have to face a full-power zombie when you do. Can you really force her into a new cage on your own?"

I get what you're saying.

I do. I really do.

But that's not it, Nagisa. This isn't about whether I understand or not! I *mean…dispose of her? Take her home? Why are we even talking about this!?*

She's been with me since I was born…no, maybe even before I was born.

She's always been with me.

I felt something scratching at my chest. It was some bandages.

That's right. That Good-for-Nothing actually treated my wound this morning. Is it so wrong to think that will never end!?

"Shinobu-chan."

"…No."

"Shinobu-chan."

"No!! B-besides, not even you can kill a Youkai, right? No physical attack will work on them. So even with that huge cattle cleaver…"

"True."

She admitted that almost too readily.

And then she said it.

"We also don't even know if it's possible to actually kill a zombie. We've been chopping them up until they stop moving, but we can't prove they're really dead. And this one is based on a Youkai, so I definitely don't want to let her out of there. …I'm not taking this lightly. But if we can't kill her, we just have to find a method that doesn't require killing her."

"What are you-…?"

"I said how to 'dispose of' her, didn't I? We could bury the entire cage in the dirt or pour cement over the top. If we were on the coast, we might have been able to borrow a boat and chuck her into the ocean. Even if we can't kill her, there are plenty of ways of keeping her from moving. While she's in the cage, she can't move her arms and legs and she can't bite anyone, so there's nothing she can do. Isn't that right, Shinobu-chan? And however they settle all this, I'm guessing they'll make some reclaimed land somewhere for it. They'll probably officially call it a cemetery or memorial park or something."

"…!?"

What the hell!?

What the hell are you talking about!? Reclaimed land? Calling it a cemetery? That won't solve anything. This isn't about not dirtying our hands because we're not directly killing her! The zombie won't die that way. Whether in concrete or the bottom of the ocean, the Zashiki Warashi will be buried alive there! Will it be for centuries? Millennia? How long would she have to continue suffocating!?

"She's different…"

"How?"

"She's the Zashiki Warashi!! We can't just decide what happens to her like that!!"

"Perhaps not."

Nagisa remained calm.

I didn't feel like a single crack had opened in her heart. It felt like my fingers were sinking into a damp sponge.

"But Shinobu-chan, can you really say that when you're the one putting her in a cage? Youkai may not have any rights, but is raising her as you see fit really the right thing to do? Can you really look me in the eye and proudly tell me that?"

"…"

"Would you keep doing that for decades? For centuries? Would you ask your children and grandchildren to look after her? Hee hee. Shinobu-chan's children… But would that really make that Youkai happy?"

I was certain Nagisa was right about this.

I couldn't rebut anything she was saying.

But that still wasn't it.

We can't just decide to keep her because it's right or decide to bury her because keeping her wouldn't be right! This Good-for-Nothing Youkai is too important to decide like that!!

"Shinobu-chan."

Nagisa spoke gently and softly as if trying to get a small child to listen to her.

"I understand how you feel, Shinobu-chan."

"How could…how could you possibly know how I feel!?"

"Do you remember the St. Bernard I used to have?"

My shoulders gave a start.

Just like the Zashiki Warashi and me, that had been Nagisa's partner since before she was born. And when that dog had grown old and lived a life of suffering, who was it that had taken its life?

"No one wants to say goodbye. We don't want to think about the end. But sometimes you have to. …Not being able to control your own life is painful. When people are telling you they're suffering and that all life comes to an end, it's irresponsible to refuse to listen. Shinobu-chan, do you think that Youkai is happy right now? Do you really believe that?"

Stop it.

"She doesn't know who she is, she's trapped in a cage, and she's baring her fangs against the person she most wanted to save, even if she always complained. …Are you going to keep that going for decades? And if you make a mistake in caring for her and get bitten, you'll become a zombie too. If she has enough of a mind left to understand that, how much despair do you think she would feel? Hurting the people you care for the most hurts more than anything else. I know that alllll too well. Do you think she might prefer saying goodbye here and suffocating for an eternity to that?"

Please stop it!!

"Shinobu-chan. …Like I said. I understand how you feel."

She reached for the thick glittering blade of the cattle cleaver named Namagusa.

"Just because it's the most logical answer doesn't mean the human heart can bear it. So Shinobu-chan… If you insist that you can't do it, then let's think up some other way that doesn't require dirtying our own hands. Maybe create a slope that will send the cage down after some amount of time passes. And digging a hole isn't difficult. It's possible we could find some other solution years or decades later and we could dig her back up."

"Just stop it!!!"

I cut her off at the top of my lungs.

My mind had gone entirely blank.

The next thing I knew, I had grabbed something from the hallway wall. It had a wooden handle like a mop, but with a beak-like piece of dark steel on the end. It was known as a hooked rod and it was an old tool meant to clear underbrush from a path or destroy the surrounding homes to prevent the spread of a fire.

And when I pointed that weapon at Nagisa, she narrowed her eyes in a horribly, horribly cold look.

"I see…"

"No, um, Nagi-…"

My attempts to explain myself did not reach the girl in front of my eyes.

Something gave a roar and the air split apart in a horizontal slash.

It was the cattle cleaver which was as long as a Japanese sword.

I raised the hooked rod, but not because I had tried to. It was more like ducking down when a ball flew toward your face. The impact reached me a moment later. I really did think my thumb had been taken out. More than just the muscle, I felt the dull pain of the bone shifting out of place.

"Ah…gh…!!"

Still, I did not drop the hooked rod.

My bones had not actually broken.

I finally moved back, dragging my aching arm with me. She had lured me into using my dominant hand to prevent me from using it anymore. She was preparing to kill me. I moved away from her. Oddly, I ended up with my back against the bear cage holding the

Zashiki Warashi.

“Do you understand, Shinobu-kun?”

Nagisa opened her eyes strangely wide and let Namagusa sway loosely in her grasp.

Her movements were far removed from kendo or proper sword fighting, but they were endlessly terrifying. She looked like a hopeless wall that would only get me chopped in two no matter which direction I attacked from.

“*Do you really understand what it means to make an enemy of me here?*”

“…!!!???”

Don’t let it get to you.

Don’t lose heart before the fight even begins. If you can’t beat her with 100% of your strength, don’t even think about trying to defeat her when your fear has weakened you to 50% or 60%!!

You can’t give in on this one.

Whether she’s a zombie or whatever else, I can’t give up on that Zashiki Warashi!! Just because she’s a Youkai and we might not be able to kill her is no reason to bury her in the dirt and leave like she’s some old rotting garbage. I can’t allow that. Youkai don’t die and zombies are immortal, so we might be able to dig her up years or decades later? That isn’t the point!! I can’t bury her in the first place!!!!!!

That may have been the most logical choice.

It may have been a kind suggestion that took my feelings into consideration and hid the end result from me.

But…

“We don’t know yet.”

“Shinobu-chan?”

“This zombie outbreak isn’t being caused by a strange curse or a mysterious pathogen. It might have to do with the Youkai known as a Kasha! If this is a Package someone set up, everyone might be freed from their zombification if we eliminate the Package!!”

I desperately tried to push back with my voice, but Nagisa took a casual step forward.

Her huge cattle cleaver swung diagonally toward me.

“Gwaahh!!”

My hand stung as it held the handle.

I couldn’t think about defeating her. It was practically a miracle I was blocking her attacks at all.

“Allow me teach you some manners… This is the same as the hierarchy of dominance among animals. While family is of course important, you need to be strict with them when necessary or a lot of children will begin to see themselves at the top of a strange pyramid-shaped hierarchy.”

No, it was possible she was intentionally toying with me. I wasn’t blocking her attacks. I started to get the feeling she was targeting my hooked rod to punish me.

“Shinobu-chan.”

“…No.”

“Shinooobu-chaaan?”

“No! No!!”

The pain in my hand was also part of her setup. When I flinched back, she took action. Her tail fluttered behind her and the cattle cleaver shot up. She raised it high. She was exposing her body to danger in order to pull off a shooting star of an attack with the most weight behind it. By the time I realized that, she had already swung the cattle cleaver and almost double the impact reached me. She made more and more of the same attack. I felt like my fingers were going to break before the hooked rod. No matter what I did, I was gradually pushed back.

The bear trap was already right behind me.

The zombie in a red yukata shook the bars. If I moved back any further, she would grab my back. She would bite me and it would all be over. Nagisa was telling me to give up before that happened. A wordless pressure was telling me to realize that was a dangerous enemy rather than a woman I had to protect.

But…

But!!

I'll say it as many times as I have to: but!! She may be stupid, good-for-nothing, and useless. She may be the kind of person who ends up turning into the worst zombie of them all when she tries to save me. But!!

She still came here to save me.

If she hadn't tried to go against her character here, this wouldn't have happened.

I can't punish her for trying to help. I don't want to! How can I just abandon her here!?

The decapitated people might be a lost cause.

The people who have been devoured and had their organs dragged out might just die even if they turn back into humans.

But this Zashiki Warashi has no obvious injuries. Her eyes may be muddy, but her hair and skin are perfectly lively. If there's a way to turn the zombies back to normal, she might be able to return to her normal life as a Good-for-Nothing Youkai. Right!?

I've had enough.

I've had enough of simply giving up on all the lives around me!!

"P-pant! Pant, pant…!!"

After thinking through all that, my thoughts started wandering.

Oh, so that's it.

I looked at Nagisa's face again.

Whether consciously or subconsciously, she may have had a reason for advocating such drastic measures.

"If we found a way to turn the zombies back to normal…"

"What is it, Shinobu-chan? Do you want me to call you a good boy now?"

What would that mean for everything Nagisa had done?

Once I realized that, all sound seemed to vanish.

The nearby deaths were filled with the same stinging warmth one felt when holding ice barehanded for extended periods of time.

I had not out-and-out praised Nagisa's actions, but in our extreme situation, I had considered them acceptable. She had even saved me several times.

But that was based on the assumption that the zombies could never return to being human, so killing them was the only option.

What if there was some other way?

What if Nagisa had been killing human lives, not zombies?

What would that mean for Nagisa? It was unlikely the courts would be able to handle an unprecedented zombie outbreak. And as a minor, the law and privacy concerns might treat her favorably.

But this wasn't about what other people thought. Could Nagisa herself forgive her actions?

So she would prefer that the zombies did not return to normal.

That was why she could not stand to see me protecting the Zashiki Warashi. This was different from killing. She held no grudge or hatred toward the Zashiki Warashi. She simply wanted to put her mind at ease by going through the motions of "disposing of" that zombie. She wanted me to show everything was fine and that I accepted her point of view.

"I can't believe this…"

"?"

My expression twisted and Nagisa slowly tilted her head.

She gave me a crazed look with the giant cattle cleaver glittering in her hand.

She looked like that St. Bernard waiting for further instructions.

Nagisa had acted on her own to defeat the zombies, but did I have any right to criticize her when I had just sat there and let her rescue me? Couldn't you even say my inability to do anything had forced the role of killer onto her?

So this was a choice between extremes.

Would I choose the zombie Zashiki Warashi or the zombie-killing Nagisa?

This was my first and final choice where choosing one would mean decisively forsaking the other.

Why?

Why wasn't there a convenient way to choose everyone? Why wasn't there a way to not hurt or abandon anyone, like I was creating a cheap harem?

I raised the battered hooked rod in both hands and faced Nagisa once more. Her cattle cleaver could lop off the heads of those zombies that were as strong as bears. Depending on how I answered or how she felt, I could be chopped to pieces right here.

I tightly clenched my teeth.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

And I chose.

"Sorry, Nagisa. I just can't abandon this Good-for-Nothing Youkai!!"

I said it.

They were decisive words of parting.

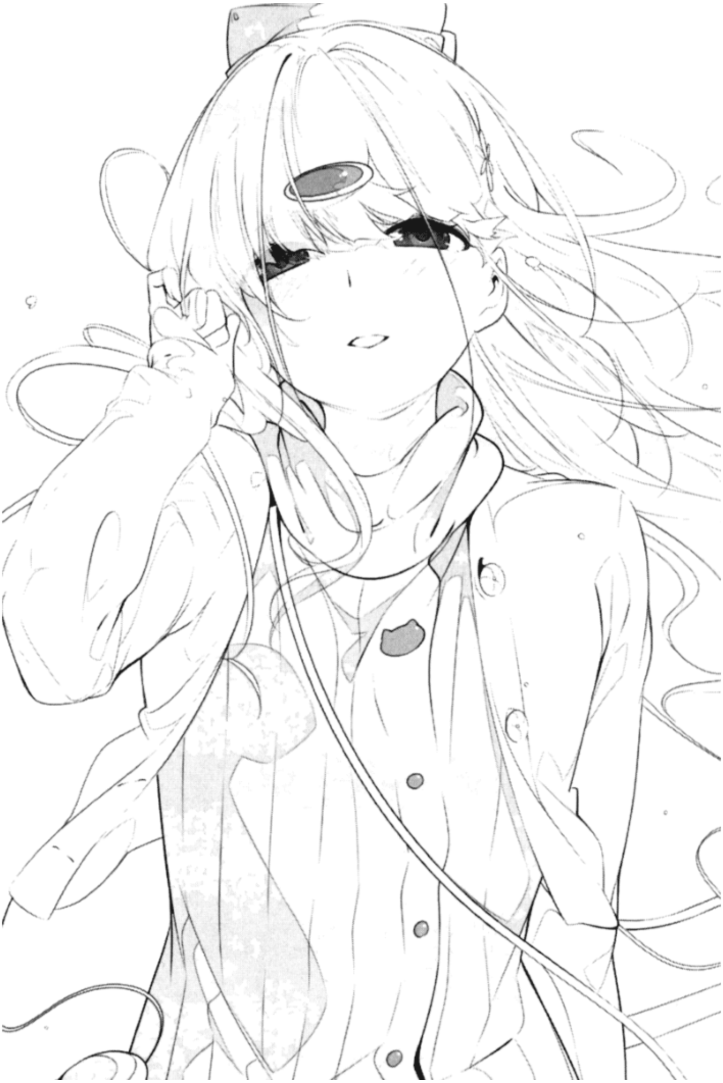
But I couldn't.

It was simply not something I could do.

Call it naïve or unrealistic, but I couldn't see myself burying her alive, leaving her to suffocate for eternity, and just forgetting about it all. I wouldn't make it back alive. If I chose that path, I wouldn't even need to hang myself or throw myself from a cliff. I knew for a fact I would simply stop breathing and die on the spot.

So…

Nagisa approached ever so slowly. She looked absolutely confident in her victory, like she only had to think about how to make me give up. The tip of her sword-like cattle cleaver scraped against the wood of the hallway floor. Once it hopped up, it could chop off any part of my body she wanted. I knew that, but I could not move back any further. The cage was there. I would be in range of the zombie Zashiki Warashi's hands reaching from between the bars. Moving forward or back would lead to my death.



In that instant, during that scorching blank period, I still rejected the one and only path that would allow me to smile and return alive.

"Yes."

Then an oddly cheerful voice reached my ears.

With that brutal cattle cleaver in hand, Nagisa took a step – just one step – back. She moved away from me as I stood protectively in front of the cage.

It was a clear sign of parting.

But even then, my childhood friend and ex-girlfriend looked at my dirty face like it was something radiant.

Clear drops fell like traces of light.

She spoke to me as I took the Youkai’s side to the very end.

“That’s the Shinobu-chan I fell in love with.”

Part 3

I couldn't use the dump truck and I had parted ways with Nagisa and her giant cattle cleaver.

All I had was the useless Good-for-Nothing Youkai and the bear trap that had wheels yet was as heavy as a giant rock. Its weight prevented me from carrying anything else with me, so I had left the hooked rod back in the house. And unlike Nagisa, I would only get killed if I tried to take on a zombie.

Zombies could be hiding anywhere outside, but hiding in the house forever wouldn't help.

Despite the danger, I took the Zashiki Warashi out in her cage.

As before, our destination was the mountain peak. More accurately, the dog square up there. Finding a paraglider was our first goal. I had no idea if I could carry the Zashiki Warashi in her cage with one of those, but I had to get her out of this awful city. I wasn't thinking about anything beyond that. The Succubus and Aoandon back home might be able to figure out the details of the zombie outbreak and I could also run crying to Hyakki Yakou.

The best option would be to search out the source of the outbreak in the city and escape with the Zashiki Warashi once she recovered, but the city was a large place and I didn't know if the core of the Kasha Package was even in the city. Escaping would be better than searching randomly. My life wasn't the only one at risk here, so I couldn't assume I could do everything on my own.

"Ha ha. This is awful. Simply awful."

I couldn't help but speak aloud.

I may have taken a longer rest than I had thought because things were growing dark by the time I left the house. The snow had started covering the road. It was not entirely white yet, but it covered the surface like a transparent sherbet and my shoes threatened to slip if I let my guard down. Nagisa's warmth was gone from the silent mountain road. She had left quickly in order take action in her own way.

Meanwhile, the Zashiki Warashi seemed entirely carefree in her cage. She was still shaking the bars of the bear trap, but it looked more like she was having fun making noise than really trying to escape.

“Gau.”

“Shut up. I don’t know when a zombie could show up, so don’t make so much noise.”

She wasn’t listening.

I felt like I was pushing a giant baby carriage.

Since she was rattling the cage, I tried distracting her with something else. When I put a handkerchief inside the cage, she grabbed it, tugged at it, smelled it, and finally bit the corner of the square cloth. She looked like a frustrated upper class girl.

But just like with the ham, she would put anything in her mouth. I couldn’t have her swallowing them, but it wouldn’t hurt to have a few things on hand. I started uselessly regretting not searching for some things to use before leaving the house.

For the time being, I pulled out my cellphone and typed “Things she can put in her mouth” in the notes app.

The Zashiki Warashi had been entirely focused on the handkerchief, but her eyes quickly turned to the phone. I slowly waved it back and forth and found her gaze was perfectly locked onto it.

“Wh-what? I’m not giving you this.”

“Gau!”

“I said no! Oh, honestly. You have an even more expensive smartphone in your cleavage, you know!? Not that I want you chewing on that!!”

“Gau gau gau!!”

“Oh, shut up!”

Speaking to her wasn’t doing any good and her yukata looked like it was going to slip off if she struggled any more. I didn’t want to be wheeling around a naked Youkai, so I tried to figure out another way to bring the smartphone to her attention.

Um, I can’t use normal phone calls or emails, but there’s a way to send data directly between phones, right? Um, Ranzono Sachi was using it during the Oomukade business. It’s the same way a phone connects wirelessly to a printer. And I was using it to speak with Kamimaki-san and the others in the dump truck. Right…

Did it!!

I tested it out by sending a blank email to the smartphone (that technically belonged to me) held in the Zashiki Warashi’s cleavage.

It must have been on silent because all I heard was the whirring of a small motor.

And…

“Nyau!?”

Her shoulders jumped in the red yukata, but…

What? Are zombies really this stupid? Why isn’t she noticing the smartphone!?

Blank email, blank email, blank email!!

“Nyau! Gyah!? Nyau nyau!!”

She jumped each time, but she showed no sign of noticing the phone.

Hmm, that didn’t work. But wait. I think it had different settings for emails and phone calls.

I switched to making a call so it would ring.

I couldn’t remember what movie’s theme song it was, but a dull melody played from the headphones attached to the smartphone.

“Gyah! Gau gau!! Gau!!”

“Wait, why are you getting all excited!?”

When I saw her violently shaking the bars, I sent another empty email. I heard the vibration and saw her shoulders jump and her long black hair swing around as she looked around.

Hm? Is it just me or is this cellphone warming up?

I was gradually starting to enjoy it, but I couldn't let myself laugh at this.

Maybe this was how Akehara-san felt as she tried to turn her unreachable beloved into a zombie to own him.

You can't, Shinobu! You can't take a video! Don't point the phone toward the cage! Yes, it's funny. Really funny. But this is something you can't let yourself save!! Even if she comes back to her senses, she'll climb into her futon and never want to come out again!!

As I was wasting time on that, I heard something.

It sounded like some snow had fallen from a tree branch behind me.

I looked back into the darkness and then I froze in place.

A swarm of zombies was approaching.

Twenty to thirty people with white hair and red and purple skin were climbing the mountain road toward us.

"…!?"

They were still a fair distance away, so they may not have actually noticed us yet.

But it was only a matter of time.

I grabbed the bear trap's handles to increase our pace forward, but the zombies were clearly lighter and stronger. They were going to catch up. I began gasping for breath as I rushed myself. My eyes met those of the caged Zashiki Warashi. I couldn't throw her into that group, but what was I actually supposed to do? Not even Nagisa with her sword of a cattle cleaver could handle that many, so how was I supposed to deal with them? On the other hand, hiding with that giant cage was simply unrealistic. After all, that stupid Youkai was still rattling the cage!

What was I supposed to do?

What was I supposed to do?

What was I supposed to do?

"Goddammit!!!!!"

I shouted and began to move. I lowered the stopper on the side of the cage's wheels and jumped over the mountain road's guardrail with the cage still on the road. I hid on what was more a cliff than a slope.

Footsteps soon filled the road.

The zombies were approaching the bear trap I had left behind.

I hadn't been able to do anything!

I felt along the slope and grabbed a stone about the size of a baby's head. If any of the zombies tried to destroy the cage, it didn't matter anymore. I swore in my heart I would do whatever it took to smash their head in.

I waited for that moment.

The biting winter wind struck me and an unpleasant sweat coated my face.

But…

"…?"

The time never came.

The group with muddy eyes avoided the cage in the center of the road and continued up the slope. They vanished into the darkness without so much as glancing at the defenseless Zashiki Warashi.

…Oh, I get it.

Zombies didn't eat each other. They only targeted living humans. The caged Zashiki Warashi was one of them, so they would ignore her.

"But…"

Could I maybe use this?

Part 4

The next problem I came across was not far from the peak.

The sun had completely set and true darkness had set in. The snow was even heavier than before and the road was entirely covered in white.

Meanwhile, a certain facility was glowing brightly, like someone had forgotten to switch off the lights.

It was a mountain gas station.

“Gau.”

“Shut up. Just be quiet.”

Zombies with dry white hair were hanging around the gas station. I didn’t know if they were the same ones that had passed us before, but there were a lot of them. It looked like enough for a soccer team. If I tried to break through them, I’d definitely be killed.

But a tractor was parked a little up the mountain road from the gas station. If its handbrake was lowered and it slid down the slope, it would take out quite a few of the zombies. If used right, it could knock them all off the cliff.

Of course, this was like finding the keys were locked in the car. I wanted to deal with that red and purple group, but I couldn’t reach the tractor when it was past the zombies.

Not normally anyway.

“Okay, okay. I’ve linked with the smartphone’s camera.”

I nodded as I saw the footage from the Zashiki Warashi’s cleavage displayed on my cellphone.

I then looked the Good-for-Nothing Youkai in the eye and made a suggestion.

“Listen, Zashiki Warashi. The zombies won’t attack you, so climb the slope, reach the tractor, and lower the handbrake. And after that come back in the cage. Okay?”

“Gau gau!! Grrr!!”

“Yeah, I know you aren’t going to listen to me. That’s why I’ll be sending you empty emails and calling you.”

By switching between the vibrating and the dull melody from the headphones, I could get some entertaining reactions out of the sexy Youkai in the red yukata. It was the same as Nozaki Haru controlling the zombies with the cigarette butts and rotting smell. I had the gas and the brakes and I had a camera. I didn’t have a real steering wheel, but I couldn’t be picky now.

“Go, Zashiki Warashi! Pacific Zashi-… Pacific Good-for-… Dammit, I can’t come up with one that sounds good! Well, whatever. Zashiki Robo, attack!!”

I climbed up onto the cage, opened the guillotine-style door, and controlled the zombie Zashiki Warashi with the cellphone and smartphone. At first, my heart was nearly crushed from the fear of her ignoring my orders and attacking me, but for some reason she quickly grew obedient when I sent a bunch of empty emails to set the vibration going (between those giant tits of hers). In fact, she seemed a little afraid.

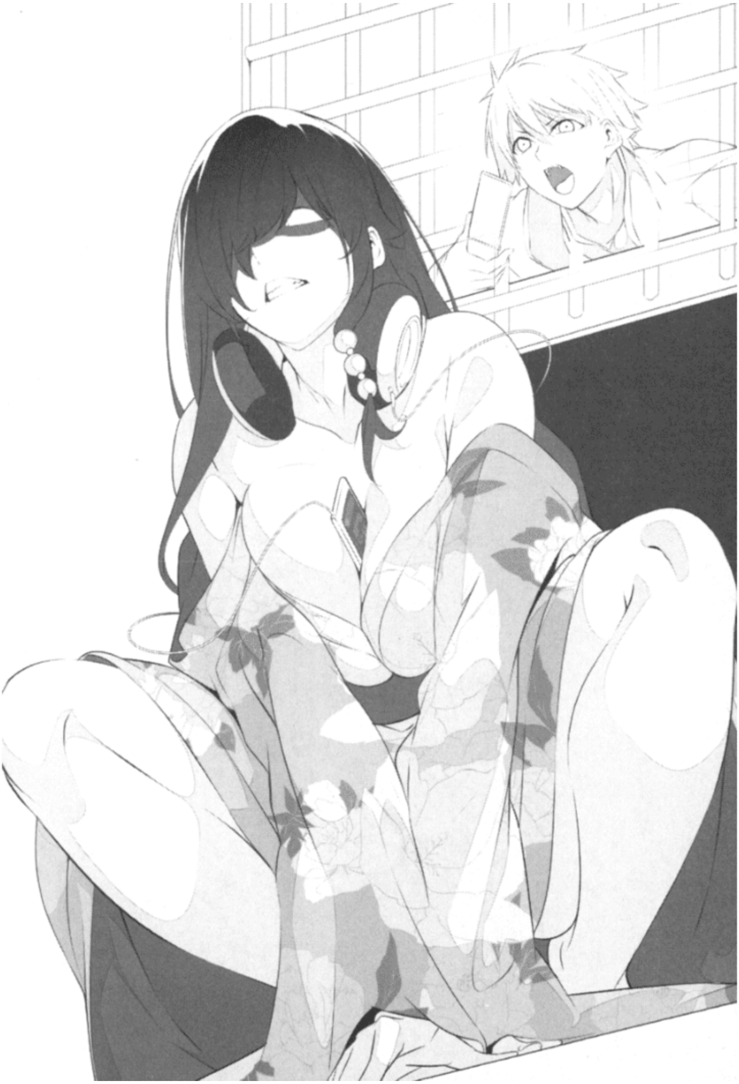
Once she changed direction, I triggered the ringtone and the excited Zashiki Warashi charged toward the zombies.

I probably shouldn’t be thinking this, but this is pretty fun!!

I really shouldn’t be doing this, should I!?

I watched from afar at first, but the mountain was dark at night. The light from the gas station could only do so much, so I started looking at the smartphone camera’s footage on my cellphone screen. Meanwhile, I used the gas and brakes to adjust her movements. She passed the zombies and arrived at the tractor up the slope.

Now for the handbrake.



Reach your hand in from the side and…no, no. That's the shift lever. And that's the steering wheel. Don't get distracted by the strap attached to the key in the ignition!? Go for the handbrake!!

After grabbing about everything *but* what I wanted, her slender hand finally managed to move the handbrake.

The giant wheels began to move and the tractor started down the slope.

The white-haired zombies didn't seem able to think, so they didn't even try to evade. It was almost amusing how they were all hit like bowling pins. The tractor carried all those zombies with it as it rolled past the gas station, hit the guardrail, and tumbled down the cliff.

“Perfect!! That was a perfect 100, you Indoor Youkai!!”

When I called loudly to her from atop the cage, the Zashiki Warashi looked over at me as if she had just remembered there was living flesh here. She charged back with terrifying speed.

I climbed down from the cage and circled to the opposite side from the guillotine-style door.

She ran in a straight line like a cat crashing into a TV screen and threw herself right into the bear trap.

I winced at the painful-sounding crash, climbed back on top of the cage, and manually forced down the door. That settled it.

“Gau gau!!”

“Hey… I know it’s wrong to say this to a zombie…but are you an idiot?”

I was a little disturbed by how I was gradually getting used to this.

And…

“…?”

I spotted some more shadows moving in the darkness, but these were not staggering around like the zombies. Were they survivors? Some people who had been waiting around may have been showing up now that the zombies were gone.

And then I realized something important.

The Zashiki Warashi was a zombie. That meant other zombies would not attack her, but what about the human beings who feared the zombies?

The situation had entirely flipped around. If they saw her, it was all over. Her hair was black and her skin was youthful, but she was still obviously a zombie.

“Dammit. If it’s not one thing, it’s another!!”

I pushed the bear trap with both hands to hurry toward the gas station. The glass was shattered and snow had gotten in, but most of the merchandise remained. I pulled out a blue tarp and threw it over the cage.

Before long, some wild-looking men who must have studied survival magazines arrived at the gas station.

“Hey! You saved our asses there. I don’t know how you did it, but it was you, right?”

“Who are you?”

“The workers at the nearby geothermal power station that provides smart power. We were caught up in all this while those of us in an outdoors group were camping. Luckily, that put us outside of civilization when the zombie outbreak started and we had our families with us.”

The man smiled.

“We’re all hiding on the campground with our families and waiting for rescue. It’s the off-season, so there’s almost no one there and barely any zombies have shown up. The problem is the lack of fire and food. Do you want to join us?”

“No, I have something I need to do.”

“Is that so?”

The middle-aged man glanced at the blue tarp.

“Um, what is that?”

The metal bars shook in response.

You moron!!

“My family. She’s actually a pretty docile St. Bernard, but this zombie stuff has her all riled up. It was getting dangerous if I didn’t keep her in the cage.”

“I see.”

Some static reached my years.

The man seemed to have an emergency radio hanging from his neck.

"I thought getting some information might help calm our nerves, but it didn't help. It's complete chaos all over the place."

"All over the place?"

I felt something heavy weighing on my stomach. What was this ominous feeling?

"Apparently the zombie outbreak is affecting ten or more cities around the country, but the news keeps saying everything's fine and there isn't any problem."

"It…isn't just here!?"

"It was a lot tenser at first. They were saying something about reporting the truth until the instant the police stormed the studio, but as time passed, the announcements grew almost overly reassuring. It's just creeping me out. I wish this thing could record."

The survival man sounded annoyed.

"And the overseas broadcasts that occasionally get in on a crossed line or something are telling an entirely different story. They're talking about holding travelers back at the borders and sealing off the sea and air routes. They're such polar opposites that I'm not sure which to believe. If only the internet would come back up."

How far did this commotion spread?

In fact, did it ever end?

I had been picturing this like a cup so full that its surface tension was barely holding on. I had thought just one drop more would send it spilling out. Then the madness and violence filling this city would spill over to the rest of the archipelago.

But who ever said the surface tension was still holding on?

Wasn't it possible it had broken long ago?

"…"

"Did I scare you? Either way, we just have to do what we can. If you ever change your mind, feel free to join us. Follow the river and you'll reach the campground."

"Hey! This might not help much, but the zombies seem to track their prey by smell. If you find a way to cover your tracks like you're trying to escape a dog or a bear, you might have better odds of surviving."

"Thanks. If we make it out of here alive, let's go get a drink somewh-…no, you look like you're in high school. Well, we can still get something to eat."

We shook hands and parted ways.

I turned my back on the survivors as they searched through the gas station and I resumed my journey to the peak.

…I didn't tell them about the paragliders.

I may have had an excuse. If I told them, they would have insisted on coming along. And the longer they were with me, the greater the risk of them noticing the Zashiki Warashi. Not to mention that an outsider like me would be eliminated first if it came to a fight over a limited number of paragliders. And the most obvious way of eliminating me would be to kill me.

So what I did was logical and efficient.

I faked a kind smile and turned my back while hiding the most important fact concerning their survival.

But if they were attacked and became zombies themselves, how could I possibly take responsibility?

Part 5

The Zashiki Warashi and I finally arrived at the dog square at the peak.

The entire area was decorated with pure white snow.

I observed the area from a distance to make sure there were no zombies and then I shined my cellphone's backlight around.

There was a large fenced-off area for taking dogs for a walk and a few stables and a food processing building were packed in close together. The others may have been residential buildings. There were a lot of wooden stakes sticking up from the snow, but they may have been to tie the dogs to.

However…

"Where are the paragliders?"

The units with engines may have been kept inside on days like this. With panic in my hearts, I pushed the bear trap toward the buildings.

You're kidding.

This can't be.

There were no lights on in any of the buildings and no one responded when I pounded on the doors. I peered in a few of them, but I didn't see any people or pedigree dogs. It almost looked like the place had been abandoned for a while.

I also saw no sign of any paragliders.

Did they not rent them out? Had hobbyists simply brought their own here because the dog square wasn't in use?

If so, what was I supposed to do? If I couldn't use my plan to escape Bozen City by air, I would have to break through at the base of the mountain. Even if I could use the zombie Zashiki Warashi, breaking through that zombie-infested city simply wasn't possible!

So was I supposed to just wait for help to arrive?

Would I wait for a rescue team to arrive by helicopter like those people I had met at the gas station were doing?

“I can’t…”

After thinking about it, I shook my head.

I had the zombie Zashiki Warashi with me. Whether it was the police, the firefighters, or the JSDF, no human rescue team would let me bring the Zashiki Warashi with me. Or if they did, it would be as a research sample. If she was taken from me, it was meaningless!!

I couldn’t escape on my own and I couldn’t wait for rescue.

Was this really game over? I couldn’t come up with any other ideas.

“…”

I wandered outside the building where I put the Zashiki Warashi’s cage.

With nowhere to go, I leaned back against the outer wall and slid down to sit on the snow.

I looked up at the thick clouds covering the night sky and voiced my despair.

“Why…?”

We had crushed quite a few zombies with the dump truck. All the cellphone shop workers had been wiped out. The Zashiki Warashi had turned into a zombie when she showed up to help and differences over how to handle her had led to a split with my childhood friend and ex-girlfriend Nagisa. I had knocked a bunch of zombies off the cliff with a tractor, deceived some innocent survivors, and finally arrived at the peak.

And yet this was what I found.

What do you mean there aren’t any paragliders!?

It was true I had no actual data and was basing my decisions on mere speculation. I was assuming there were paragliders at the peak, assuming I could escape the city on one, assuming there weren’t any zombies outside the city, and most of all, assuming the zombie Zashiki Warashi could be turned back to normal. No, maybe those were more hopes than they were speculation.

But I had done everything I could to make it this far.

I had lost so much.

So couldn't I be rewarded just a little? Could I really end up with nothing and have to start back from square one!?

"…"

My mind was spinning.

The simplest choice rose in the back of my mind.

I could give up on the Zashiki Warashi and think about escaping Bozen City on my own. That would at the very least leave me with the option of waiting for rescue.

But…

"I can't…"

Why did I have to remember it now?

That sexy Zashiki Warashi generally acted like a big sister, but she would start crying with surprising ease. It happened when the internet was down, when I got mad and confiscated her video games, or…that time long ago when she broke my toy robot. We got into a big argument then and she ended up crying.

Thinking back, that was when we had stopped taking baths together and sleeping in the same futon.

Why had that happened?

In that argument, I had seen a side of her that went beyond being my "Nee-chan". I had seen her as an unreachable and unshakable figure, so it had been a shock that a kid's words were enough for her to bawl like that. It had been enough to destroy my image of her.

That said, I wasn't disappointed or disillusioned.

In fact…

"Oh, I get it now."

I finally remembered and I spoke the fact I had just realized.

"*You're just a girl, aren't you?*"

She wasn't some formless "Nee-chan". She was an individual who could form any kind of relationship. She could be a friend, a best friend, or even a lover. She was the girl closest to me.

It was said Zashiki Warashi were a collection of the young children killed during famines and the like.

Her sexy figure might seem out of place for that, but there may have been a reason for it.

Maybe she was a collection of those kids' desire to grow up and be seen as an older sister.

Maybe that was why she had tried to play the part of the ideal "Nee-chan" in front of me.

But that had only been an act that would fall apart due to the smallest things.

What if deep down, she was just a normal girl?

After realizing that and understanding that, I had no longer been able to bathe with her or sleep in the same futon as her.

"Ha ha…"

My escapist thoughts were trying to keep me from viewing the reality around me.

But I felt like those thoughts had led me to an answer.

I slapped both my cheeks and listened to the pleasant sound as I focused on what I had to do.

I definitely couldn't abandon her now. A Zashiki Warashi wasn't a special being that could rule over everything when thrown out into the world on her own. She was nothing more than a girl who would cry and not know what to do when things got tough. If I knew that, how could I leave her in a city full of zombies?

I would save her no matter what it took.

If I couldn't say that, how could I call myself a man?

Part 6

I couldn’t expect to find a paraglider in the long-since-abandoned dog square.

I would need to rethink our escape plan from the ground up, but I couldn’t just mope around forever. I had come this far, so I at least had to search around the dog square to see if there was anything at all I could use.

“The food processing building.”

I had no idea what was going to happen, so it was possible I would need a weapon like Nagisa had. I searched through the building with that in mind, but I only found a work bench with an attached electric tool. There was nothing small enough to carry around with me. I opened all the doors, hoping to at least find a knife or some scissors, but I found something else entirely behind one of them.

When I opened some thick metal double doors, I found a long, long stairway leading underground with a shimenawa decorating the top of the entrance.

I also saw the Hyakki Yakou emblem I had seen during the battle with the Aoandon.

The pure gold family crest had a shimenawa hanging from the very center.

“What the hell is this?”

“Gau.”

Asking the zombie Zashiki Warashi wasn’t going to help.

This was clearly suspicious, but I had a nagging feeling it wasn’t going to lead to an escape route. Finding a cave at the mountain’s peak made me think of the term Mikuchi-sama, but I had given up on doing anything on my own. If I was taken out here, what would happen to the caged Zashiki Warashi? Escaping together was my top priority. Once we reached some safe place, I could ask some big names like the Succubus or the Aoandon. I could even ask Hyakki Yakou for help. If we then found we had to go back to Bozen City to return the zombies to normal, we could do so with all the equipment we might need. I had no reason to risk my own life and the Zashiki Warashi's fate on a one-shot gamble here.

With that in mind, I prepared to close the metal doors, but then I heard something rolling toward me.

"Hm? Hey, wait!!"

The foundation must have sunk at some point because the floor was slanted just a bit. That meant the wheeled bear trap was rolling straight toward me!

For a second, I considered trying to catch it, but I quickly realized that wasn't possible. That thing was meant to carry two or three hundred kilo bears. It had to be pretty solid and heavy. If it picked up speed it wouldn't just hit me. It would send me flying!

So I quickly fled to the side.

"Gau!!"

As the Zashiki Warashi held onto the bars inside the cage, I thought I saw her giving me a look of pure spite.

A moment later, the cage fell down the stairs beyond the door.

The crashing sounds continued for a while afterwards.

"Ah…"

Once the sound completely stopped, I peered into that darkness.

These were the blatantly fishy stairs leading underground below the shimenawa. I hadn't wanted to go down there, so I sounded really annoyed.

"But I guess I have to go down there to collect that idiot…"

Part 7

The stairway was a lot longer than I had thought.

Once I finally reached the bottom, I found the bear trap on its side and the Zashiki Warashi glaring at me with a hint of fear in her eyes.

It was the look of a wild animal that could no longer trust humans after burning itself on a campfire.

“Gau gau!! Grrr!!!”

“Sorry. I’m sorry, Zashiki Warashi. But there’s no way I could have stopped that.”

I apologized and somehow managed to right the toppled cage. Then I looked back the way we had come. Could I really climb those stairs with that cage?

I was worried, but since we were down here, I decided to keep going. It was possible there was another exit.

The underground space was quite large. At the center was a pit twenty meters across and too deep to see the bottom. Quite a few small shacks and bamboo passageways had been built in three dimensions around the pit. The wooden walls were branded with Hyakki Yakou’s emblem. There were plenty of bare lightbulbs, candles, and lanterns, so the space was filled with a dim orange light. The stuffy scent of dirt was mixed with the scent of machine oil. There was a simple reason why.

“A power shovel and a bulldozer? There’s even a tunnel boring machine with attached arms.”

There was a lot of the yellow heavy machinery used for public works projects.

I could tell a lot of effort had gone into making this space, but what was it for?

I pushed the bear trap down the gradually descending pathway that spiraled like a giant spring.

After continuing for a bit, the scenery changed entirely. The buildings and passageways had burned away. There also must have been a cave-in because the bedrock had collapsed in places.

What had happened?

No matter how big this place was, that would still mean a fire in a subterranean space. The smoke and lack of oxygen scared me more than the flames and heat.

“Gau…”

“Hm? What is it, Zashiki Warashi?”

She was acting odd inside the cage.

She was sitting motionless in a corner with her hands on the top of her black-haired head.

Was she afraid of something? I doubted it was just the fire, so what had caused it? I looked over to the fire-blackened pillars, but I couldn’t tell what the small building had been used for originally.

Curious, I brushed my fingers across the burned materials and thought. Suddenly, what looked like a stuffed animal head poked out from behind the corner.

No, it was a small canine Youkai.

“Hm? You’re that Sunekosuri, aren’t you?”

“I never expected to see you here, Jinnai Shinobu! Oh! But this is hardly the time. Hide! You really need to hide!”

“?”

“The zombies will be here soon! Um, oh, that Zashiki Warashi also needs to-…wahh!! She’s a zombie too!?”

The canine Youkai suddenly appeared and nearly pissed himself, so I scooped him up in one hand. It didn’t matter if the zombies found the Zashiki Warashi, so I left the cage there. However, the zombies tracked their prey by smell, so…

“Hey, I’d like to base some stuff on a dog’s sense of smell!”

“Who are you calling a dog!? I am a proper Youkai called a

Sunekosu-…ghh!?”

He’s useless!

At any rate, I ran into the remains of the burned-down shack with the Sunekosuri. I lay down on the ground and held my breath.

The smell of charcoal was pretty distinctive, so I could only hope it would hide us from the zombies!

I heard some wet sounds.

They were several pairs of footsteps.

I had no real weapon and I didn’t have Nagisa’s skill to knock them off balance and then sever an arm, leg, or head with a full swing. If we were found, it was all over. We’d be powerlessly overwhelmed and eaten.

I held my breath.

My heart pounded in my head.

I could not sense any warmth in the footsteps I heard. I didn’t sense the atmospheric change felt when you’re on an elevator alone and someone else steps on.

I couldn’t move my head much, but I could see the zombies walking by beyond the burned-down wall.

They were…

“Uncle…?”

I knew it was hardly the time, but I muttered under my breath.

And it wasn’t just the detective in cardigan and slacks.

I also saw Hishigami Enbi in a torn-up Santa Claus themed swimsuit and Hishigami Mai who seemingly couldn’t use her legs since she was dragging herself forward with her arms. I also saw someone in a white kimono with long white hair spreading out from a head that dangled loosely from her neck. I was pretty sure that was the Hishigami Shikimi woman I had seen at some point.

All of them had dry white hair, muddy eyes, and red and purple skin.

What had happened here?

Why were they here in this creepy cave and why had they turned into zombies!? They all had to have been closer to the center of this than me, so how could this have happened!?

I didn't understand anything anymore.

I didn't want to believe the scene before my eyes.

"Jinnai-san?"

The Sunekosuri was saying something, but I wasn't listening.

I got up without thinking. I slowly moved my head toward them. If I could go to them, dispel this strange mirage, and prove this scene was a lie…

As I started to stand up, the small Youkai bit the back of my hand.

"Jinnai Shinobu! Stop this! Are you trying to sacrifice yourself!?"

But…

I can't let this be real…

"Refusing to face reality will save no one. If you are defeated, what will happen to the Zashiki Warashi you brought with you!?"

"———"

Those words finally focused my mind on reality.

Fortunately, the zombies had yet to notice me, so I got back down as if I had suddenly remembered the situation.

That's right.

No matter how cruel the world got and no matter how overwhelming the scenes before my eyes, I had been willing to part ways with Nagisa over this.

I couldn't end this by giving up and leaving the Zashiki Warashi all alone!

I clenched my teeth.

I could only wait for them to pass.

But…

“Gau.”

The shaking of the cage seemed to squeeze at my heart.

You Good-for-Nothing!! Do you have something against me!? You haven’t forgiven me for dropping you down those stairs, have you!? You’re pretty conceited for a zombie!!

My uncle and Hishigami Enbi coldly turned their heads.

Their feet came to a stop.

While lying on the ground, I slowly reached for some of the shockingly light wood used for the shack. It was really only charcoal now, so I was worried it would break in two the instant I hit something with it.

But after listening to the sound of the cage shaking a few more times, the zombies seemed to lose interest. Their wet footsteps slowly moved away without setting foot in the burned-down shack.

I stayed among the black charcoal for a while, letting time pass.

I could feel my heart beating so oddly fast I was sure this was taking years off my life.

“Are they…gone?”

“Looks that way.”

I hesitantly spoke and then got up from the charcoal. I poked my head out and looked around, but my uncle and the others were nowhere to be seen.

“What happened here?”

“I-I don’t know everything either, but I think we should share what information we have.”

Part 8

The Sunekosuri led me to one of the wooden shacks that had been built around seemingly at random. This one bore Hyakki Yakou's emblem as well. Once I pushed the bear trap inside, I saw a familiar face: the Deadly Dragon Princess.

That was Hishigami Mai's Shikigami.

She was lying on her back and didn't seem to have become a zombie, but she didn't look okay either. Sweat covered her unemotional face and she looked quite pale. It was like she was forcing down some pain.

How had this happened?

The Sunekosuri and I exchanged our stories leading up to this moment.

Despite being such a small Youkai, the Sunekosuri was an official member of Hyakki Yakou, so there were parts a high schooler like me had trouble comprehending. Still, I worked at processing it in my head until I had a decent understanding.

"You're kidding, right? So Majina and that Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi are involved in this?"

That was my initial reaction.

"They are at the deepest part of this cave. It seems Majina-sama developed the Ver. 40 here and has now moved onto causing this zombie outbreak. It seems to be in order to stop something, but we don't know what that something is. It's even possible naming himself the true leader of Hyakki Yakou to usurp the country's strongest organization is also part of his fight against whatever it is."

"It doesn't matter what it is. Creating an allied army to stop an UFO attack is meaningless if that allied army becomes a dictator that brings suffering to everyone. That just gives us two enemies threatening to destroy mankind."

If Majina's group had intentionally caused this zombie outbreak, stopping them was the only option.

And that meant something else was important.

“The Kasha and Mikuchi-sama. That’s probably the bottleneck here.”

I had already discussed the Kasha with Nagisa in that house, but we hadn’t known anything about Mikuchi-sama. I was fortunate to get some new information here.

To prevent the spread of disease, the people without relatives who died during a famine were thrown into a large hole in the mountain. That had eventually been broadly interpreted into throwing in the injured, criminals, and the losers of conflicts between political factions. Anyone labeled a criminal was sacrificed. Instead of throwing out the corpses to prevent the spread of disease, they had to continue throwing corpses in to keep disease from coming out.

By adding in the Kasha’s trait to move the corpses of criminals when it approached, it did sound like you could build up the basis for this zombie outbreak. But that made it sound like dying or being fatally injured in Bozen City was the trigger to become a zombie, not being bitten by a zombie.

No…

“This isn’t limited to just Bozen City, is it?”

“No. Several cities in five regions are experiencing a similar zombie outbreak. The police, firefighters, and JSDF are trying to seal them off, but if the number of zombies grows high enough, it will reach the saturation point and they will spread across Japan.”

“And you said with each generation, the zombies retain more of their rational mind. Eventually, they won’t even be aware they’re zombies.”

That “generation” became a little unclear for the people who became a zombie after dying from something other than a zombie.

“Majina-sama’s goal is to strengthen the entire Japanese population. He seems to want to increase their physical strength as much as possible while leaving them their rational minds.”

How could I believe something like that?

There had to be more to it. Maybe he was using the Kasha Package to manage the zombies' minds and he had a breaker that let him turn someone back into a corpse if he didn't like them.

And even if you kept your mind, a zombie was still a zombie. No one would want to end up like that. That's the entire reason he had to attack all of Japan at once like this. He had known from the beginning that no one would agree to it if he simply suggested the idea.

"A-anyway, it all started here in Bozen City. The other cities are probably connected by some kind of network. If we destroy the Package's core here, it should resolve all of the zombie outbreaks."

Yes.

This was what I most wanted to ask about.

"What does it meant to resolve it? Does it mean no more zombies will be made? Does it mean the zombies turn back into people? Or does it mean they'll turn back into corpses? 'Resolving' this could mean a lot of different things."

"…"

The Sunekosuri silently shook his head.

Well, it wasn't like the great Hyakki Yakou knew everything. It was possible not even Majina himself knew since he wouldn't have planned for it being stopped.

However, ignoring this would be a bad idea.

Majina's group had been spotted here in Mikuchi-sama. Given the scale of the facility, this had to be the center of it all. We needed to figure out the Kasha Package prepared here. The best plan from there would be to apply that knowledge in some way to save the Zashiki Warashi and the other zombies.

"But a Kasha, huh?"

That seemed like more of a minor Youkai than the Yuki Onna or Zashiki Warashi.

"That Youkai is said to be a cat Youkai enveloped in flames or an Oni chariot that carries criminals' souls down to the depths of hell.

The legends change age to age, though."

"Majina is skilled enough to remake the Sunekosuri named Ohatsu into pure darkness that he can use for offense or defense. If he can freely use the Kasha, he might be able to switch between the different Kasha legends like shifting gears in a car."

The Sunekosuri twitched a bit at my mention of "Ohatsu".

…?

They were the same kind of Youkai, so there may have been a connection there.

"The hell's chariot that takes criminals' souls away is the version from an older age while the cat Youkai that steals and moves corpses is the version from a newer age. Given the zombie outbreak, this might be focused more on the newer version of the Kasha."

"Um, in that case… Doesn't it appear at the funeral or graveyard, create a powerful wind to blow open the coffin lid, and steal the criminal's corpse?"

"The part about stealing the corpse must have been fulfilled by linking it to the Mikuchi-sama legend. That's probably our best bet at attacking this."

"?"

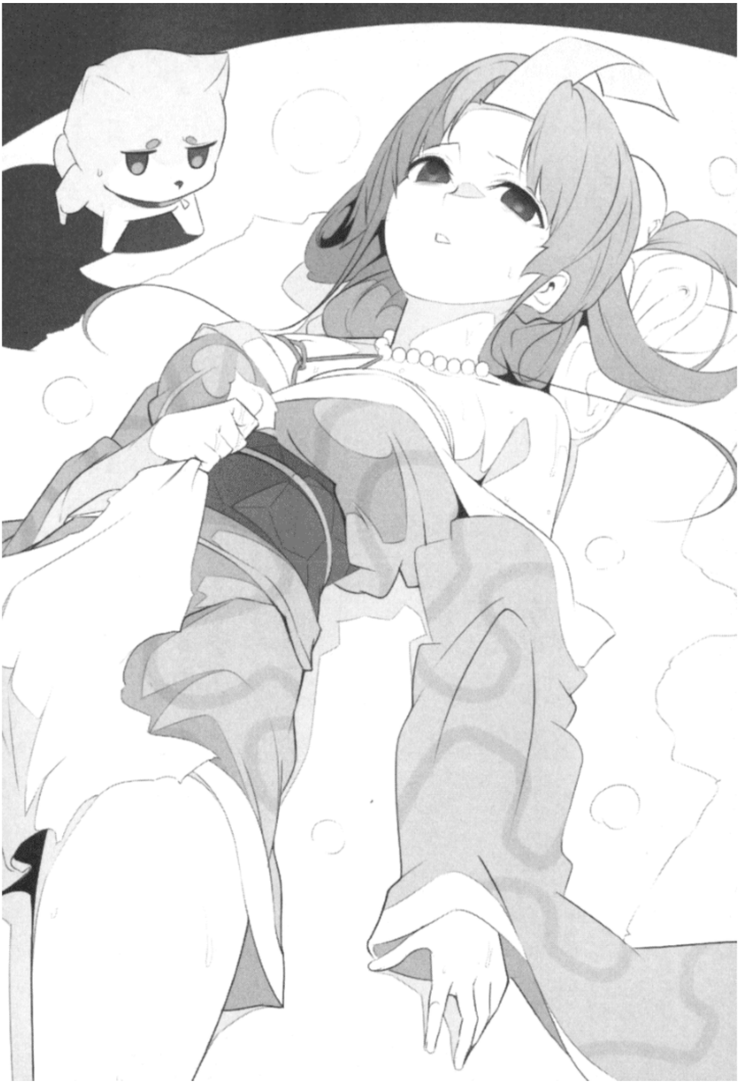
"Majina needs to be able to control the zombie outbreak. It's just like having a way to keep yourself from being infected by your own malware or from having your own counterfeit money in your wallet. In that case, there's one thing we don't know: how is Majina controlling the Kasha?"

"Come to think of it, we have a few ideas about how the zombies were spread, but there's a lot we don't know about how they're controlled. Majina-sama is powerful, so maybe he just plans to defeat any zombies that come his way."

"Even though his supposed objective is to strengthen the Japanese population? What good is killing the soldiers he himself strengthened? There's more to this. But is there some kind of symbol that restrains a Kasha? Y'know, like how a Nurikabe vanishes when you sweep the ground with a broom, how a Yuki Onna melts in a hot bath, or how the house transformed by a tanuki

Youkai reveals its true form when cigarette ashes fall on it.”

What was it?



It was on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t seem to verbalize it.

And then…

“…of Protection.”

The Deadly Dragon Princess spoke up from the floor.

“The Sword of Protection. By placing a blade next to the corpse, the later legends say the Kasha will run away without stealing it. In some regions, a Sword of Protection is placed in the coffin during the funeral or burial."

"That's it."

I snapped my fingers.

Those words caused a symbol to link together the legends and scenes in my mind. I wasn't a strange fortune-teller or onmyouji, so I couldn't be certain about the occult. Still, I was pretty sure I was headed in the right direction.

"It was Mikuchi-sama."

"What?"

"That's what's trapping the Kasha. It's a giant hole twenty meters across and who knows how deep. Hey, Sunekosuri, what do you think this symbolizes?"

"Um, the gates of hell? The Kasha is also called hell's chariot."

"I don't think you're wrong. The Youkai might be at the deepest part."

But…

"But at the same time, I'm betting it was intentionally also made a symbol of a coffin. We think of them as long rectangular boxes today, but that came from the West. During the Edo period, *weren't coffins round buckets?*"

"Ah!"

"And Mikuchi-sama isn't just a big hole. It's closely linked to death with all the people that were thrown into it over centuries. Corpses have been piling up at the bottom of the coffin. If the Kasha causes the corpses to move by approaching them, the first step would have to be diving into the coffin itself. Yes, what would work better to lure in a Kasha?"

"But…"

The Deadly Dragon Princess moved her head a little on the ground.

She looked my way.

"Where is the Sword of Protection?"

"Normally, it's placed next to the body 'ahead of time' to keep the Kasha from showing up," I answered. "But what if it was *placed on top of the giant coffin like a lid* once the Kasha went inside? The Kasha would lose its only exit, so wouldn't it be stuck at the bottom of the coffin?"

Yes.

I was pretty sure I had seen the Sword of Protection already. When it came to swords and blades, there was only one option based on what I had seen after entering Mikuchi-sama.

But what next?

The Kasha was trapped in the center of the mountain, but how were they letting its power leak out? And this wasn't complete chaos. They were "aiming" the Youkai's power at thirteen cities in five regions so the zombies would spread evenly across Japan.

"Wait."

"?"

"Sunekosuri. You said the zombie outbreak is happening in thirteen cities at once, right? Do you know the exact names?"

"Y-yes. Based on the briefing I received ahead of time, it's Bonuta City, Sange City, Mukaehi City…"

"Shourou City and Kumotsu City are on the list too, aren't they?"

"H-how did you know that?"

"When escaping in the dump truck with Nagisa and the others, I saw a burning banner. It was talking about a winter festival held in other cities around the country. That speeds this up. The zombie outbreak is occurring in the thirteen cities working with Bozen City, but what kind of energy line is connecting Mikuchi-sama to them?"

I thought for a bit and came up with a theory, even if it was a little forced.

"What about geothermal power? There's apparently a geothermal power station a bit away from Bozen City's mountain road. I met some of the workers. They said something about smart power. That means they're monitoring the power production and consumption over the internet and can send the power to the optimal locations at the optimal times. Most likely, all the cities are linked by power stations or substations like that."

"Over the internet? But aren't the phone lines and other means of communication cut off?"

"But the power is still on. That means the smart power would be too. Maybe they have their own dedicated line or maybe their information is prioritized during this kind of chaos. Y'know, like how the police and firefighters can use their cellphones even during a disaster."

The Kasha was hiding inside the volcano, the heat energy was transformed into steam, the steam turned the turbines to create electricity, and that was carried to other cities based on the data from the internet.

I didn't know how effective that really was. It might have just been an empty show of being economical to get more funding from the country and the government.

But that wouldn't matter to Majina and the Ver. 40.

Anything was fine as long as they had a line between the Kasha's power at the depths of the volcano and the rest of the country.

"That would be why the zombie outbreak spread by city. The people who died in the areas managed by the smart power were the ones turned into zombies by the Kasha and Mikuchi-sama."

The exact numbers and equations might be different, but I thought I had the general framework right. If I didn't, I was out of ideas. If we were to take this any further, we would need to be as smart as the person who had assembled it.

Namely, Majina.

That was the truly skilled man who had ruled the old Hyakki Yakou.

This large-scale zombie outbreak Package was something only he could do.

"Th-then…"

“We can ignore the smart power for now. The Package’s Achilles’ heel has to be the Sword of Protection at the top or the Kasha sealed at the bottom. If we can free the Kasha, the zombie panic in Bozen city and the connected cities will end. Just like removing a toy’s batteries.”

Whichever one we went for, there was something I had to do.

“However we do it, we’re going to be crushing Majina’s grand plan here. I doubt he’ll just sit idly by.”

That old leader of Hyakki Yakou could analyze, break down, and reconstruct any Youkai to the point that he could turn a harmless Sunekosuri into the greatest of disasters.

And the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi named Mei had been thoroughly remade by him to manipulate and create destiny.

Even if I could ignore Hishigami Shikimi since she had apparently become a zombie, there were two monsters left to face.

“Can you really take them both on at once?”

The Sunekosuri gulped and the Deadly Dragon Princess calmly voiced the result of her analysis.

“Not even Hishigami Mai’s strength was enough to ensure their defeat. The ideal was to defeat only the trickier Hishigami Shikimi and send in the Top 5 to force back Majina, the Ver. 40, and Ohatsu.”

“But…”

“Yes. Even that ideal was wishful thinking on the current Hyakki Yakou’s part. In other words, if it did not work, they were out of ideas.”

The Top 5 were all monsters on the same level as the Illness Magic User. We were up against something that even all five of them might not have been able to defeat.

What could a simple high school boy do?

The only help I had was a harmless Sunekosuri, the more than half-dead Deadly Dragon Princess, and the zombie Zashiki Warashi that

I could only control with the cellphone and smartphone. To be blunt, they weren't going to be any help. I was the only one that could actually stand in harm's way here.

And if anything was going to give me a fighting chance there…

"Majina won't be worried about a simple high school boy, right?"

"So you think you can get him to lower his guard? You think Majina-sama will do that!? Don't be ridiculous. He has made countless sacrifices to evenly spread this zombie outbreak to everyone in Japan without questioning the morality of it all. If it was necessary to fulfill his plan, he would use his full power to kill a baby. I doubt that would work on him!"

"The difference in strength here is massive. Hyakki Yakou literally refers to a hundred Oni marching through the night, but he truly has surpassed that name. Even if he did let his guard down, less than 1% of his power would still smash my body to pieces. Whether he's taking it seriously or not probably doesn't really matter with him."

I knew that.

I knew all that.

After all, he was the leader of the old Hyakki Yakou. Until the assassination, he had ruled over Japan's strongest occult organization. And because I changed history, he had faked his death instead of dying and he had the skill to hide his survival from the current Hyakki Yakou for a full decade. He was a great mountain of an enemy that made me not understand even the things that I thought I understood.

The giant pit had countless excavation tools and shacks with everything from shovels and pickaxes to a tunnel boring machine and explosives, but I doubted any one of them would put a single scratch on Majina as he smiled cheerfully in the depths.

No normal attempt would win this for me.

If I relied on childish tricks, he would pierce me through the stomach with a smile on his face.

There was nothing I could do. It was a dead end. No matter what car you chose, if you floored it toward a thick concrete wall, your car would be the one that was destroyed.

"*But that's fine*."

"?"

The Sunekosuri tilted his head and I looked them in the eye again.

"We need to defeat Majina if we're going to do something about the Kasha Package. Can you give me a hand, Sunekosuri?"

"Y-yes. With Ohatsu down there and with everything else going on, I must bring an end to Majina-sama's evil deeds."

"Deadly Dragon Princess. I know this is asking a lot given your state, but can you help me out?"

"Yes. Hishigami Mai did not ask for my help in her final moment. I believe that was to preserve me for a future opportunity."

"And Zashiki Warashi, I'll need something from you too."

She didn't reply.

I only heard the shaking of the bars.

Now, then.

"Let's get started. We only have one chance at this. This is a pretty reckless plan, but hear me out."

Part 9

Everything was ready.

This was going to be the final battle.

And not long before that clash, I had selfishly asked to be left alone with the Zashiki Warashi. The zombie outbreak was ongoing in Bozen City and the other cities, so each extra minute or second could mean the loss of another life. In that way, taking my time like this might seem profane, but this was something I had to do.

“Hey, Zashiki Warashi.”

While sitting on the ground with my back against the wall of a shack, I looked over to the bear trap. The zombie Zashiki Warashi may not have been able to recognize me because she had been grabbing at the metal bars and even gnawing on them. She would bite me to death the instant I gave her the chance.

There was no sign of who she had once been.

She was a partner who had been with me since before my birth. She had that long black hair and youthful skin. She had been close enough that I hadn’t had an issue with taking baths with her or sleeping in the same futon as her.

But…

“Apparently, I love you.”

The words spilled out.

If Nagisa had heard me, she might have chopped me to pieces, but I couldn’t stop.

“You could have just told me, you know? You could have told me the whole ‘Nee-chan’ thing was an illusion and you’re really just a girl. You could have told me I could love you like normal. If you had, I’m sure I would have gone for it a lot sooner. I mean, you’re beautiful. Your looks are perfect, you’ve got giant tits, and your hips and butt are sexy too. Why *wouldn’t* I jump at the chance? Plus, you don’t age or decline. We’ve been together since before I was born, so we know everything about each other’s habits and preferences and we almost seem to know what the other one's thinking. We've already seen every last good and bad thing about each other, so we know we won't be disappointed or get bored with each other. What is there to complain about that? …Honestly. What have I been doing all this time? I feel like an idiot for actually heading out to find a girlfriend. Why didn't I realize it until you'd turned into a zombie!?"

When surrounded by hell, I had found what it was I wanted to keep with me even if it meant abandoning all else.

Only after seeing that did I finally realize it.

I had realized I cared more about that Good-for-Nothing Youkai's smile than I did my own life. This wasn't based in pseudo-familial love. It came from a much more direct emotion.

I could not allow anyone else to harm her no matter what.

I wanted to place her above all else.

I wouldn't let anyone else touch her.

She was mine.

Not everything that came to mind was exactly pure. In fact, more of it was impure than pure. A lot of it would make me want to die from embarrassment if I said it aloud. But I couldn't lie to myself about what I thought. When you think about it, there's only one reason a teenage boy would have such muddled feelings toward such an attractive girl.

This would be why none of my other attempts at love or romance had lasted very long.

This would be why Nagisa had snapped and chased after me with a machete in middle school.

"Hey." I slowly got up from the ground. "It's pretty cheap and unfair of me to make a promise with you when you're like this."

I faced the beast's cage and took a step toward the bars.

"But if we do end this zombie outbreak caused by Majina's group…"

I stood in front of it.

The trap was made to capture a bear, so the bars were spaced wide apart. The Zashiki Warashi could reach her hands out, so approaching was dangerous.

Even so, I took another step.

I moved into the danger zone.

“If the people who turned into zombies return to normal and we can return home together…”

I placed my own palms over the hands grasping the bars. I wrapped my hands around them and gently squeezed.

It was like the preparation to push a girl back onto the bed.

I held her hands and brought my face in close.

If she bit me, I would die. I would become a zombie. I knew the risk, but I still spoke from close up.

“Then can I call you Yukari? If I have that dream to look forward to, I think I can fight even the greatest monster.”

Part 10 (3rd person)

Majina was the old leader of Hyakki Yakou. No, under their bloodline rules, he was most likely still their true master.

He was a young man with long hair and a monocle. The Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi he had traded an eyeball with stood alongside him and the Sunekosuri named Ohatsu was held in his arm. They all waited at the deepest part of Mikuchi-sama.

Lava bubbled up.

They were surrounded by intense heat and a strong smell of hydrogen sulfide. A normal person’s mind would have grown muddy after only twenty minutes in that scorching hell, but he did not have a single bead of sweat on him.

That was how inhuman he had become.

His eyes were aimed toward unseen above rather than the nearby lava.

He seemed to be waiting for someone to arrive from beyond the true darkness of that abyss.

“What are you going to do?”

“About what, Ohatsu-san?”

“The kid named Jinnai Shinobu is here. He has made it to the depths not even the current Hyakki Yakou’s greatest force could reach. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“Well, those who are meant to arrive will arrive when they are meant to. I have Mei with me, so I can only accept that destiny is a thing.”

“…”

“Also, this pleases me.”

“That the boy who walks with the Ver. 39 has taken a different path from you and the Ver. 40?”

Ohatsu’s question was followed by silence from Majina.

But it was not that he could not answer. He was taking time to think on her words.

“In the end, I couldn’t make Mei into the ideal Zashiki Warashi.”

He smiled thinly and glanced over at the Ver. 40 that did not react in the slightest.

“Whether you call it her traits, instincts, or characteristics as a Zashiki Warashi, I wanted to free her from all the rules that leave her at the mercy of her family’s fortune and misfortune. I simply wanted her to be with me, without being torn apart by the bonds of species. But after everything that happened, I ended up heading down the exact opposite path.”

Mei still did not react to his words.

The Zashiki Warashi in a white yukata was too perfect as a Zashiki Warashi. She had wished for that and Majina had provided the actual technique.

“So…”

“The way that the Ver. 39 and Jinnai Shinobu could simply smile together shined too brightly for you to bear?”

“It goes beyond just the Zashiki Warashi. I even urged on Mishima-kun when he was still green and wanted to use the police to rescue the Youkai who are neither bound by nor protected by the law. I said all sorts of idealistic things, but in the end, I was forced to rely on the organization. To me, that boy’s desire to negotiate with the Youkai until they could all smile together in a circle is a path I tried but failed to achieve.”

He slowly closed his eyes as if picturing something in his mind.

Was it a vision of a young boy smiling with so many Youkai ten years before? Or was it the back of the older boy who was now working to protect a Zashiki Warashi without abandoning her, even in this extreme hell?

“Have you caught on yet, Jinnai Shinobu-kun? …I controlled Japan’s most powerful organization, I restored the lost Zashiki Warashi techniques, and I can bend the world’s destiny to my will, but I only traveled so far in my desire to be someone like you."

Wanting to be something was not enough to be it.

It was because he could not achieve it that he dreamed of it every single night.

Majina had mastered the path of the "curse" his name meant, but now the Sunekosuri named Ohatsu spoke to him.

"Don't forget."

"Forget what?"

"It is true you weren't able to acquire everything, but there were some who followed you as you continued forward even as that path wore you down."

Majina smiled at those almost sulking words.

Then something happened.

The Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi had been as silent as a mere object, but she suddenly raised her head.

"I know, Mei."

Majina also looked back.

He could see someone beyond the curtain of extremely hot steam filled with toxic hydrogen sulfide.

The person did not hide anywhere, did not hold any kind of cheap weapon, and did not take refuge behind a Youkai.

The boy stood there all on his own.

He had chosen a reckless option that Majina never could have due to his extensive knowledge of paranormal techniques.

"Welcome, Shinobu-kun. But this is the end."

Majina spoke gently.

As he did, he placed two raised fingers on Ohatsu's forehead.

The high school boy with hair dyed blonde opened his mouth to respond.

“Th-…”

Before he could even begin, Majina’s attack burst straight through Jinnai Shinobu’s chest.

A Sunekosuri’s existence was based in the vague fear of something lurking at one’s feet while walking along a path late at night.

Majina had taken Ohatsu’s small canine form and returned her to that original darkness, transforming her into “something that gives off a sense of death”. He rearranged that into something like a tornado or a giant fang and used it to stab through Jinnai Shinobu’s body.

This was the same technique once used on the Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi. The Youkai was stripped of their flesh, mind, personality, and dignity. They were reduced to a mere phenomenon to alter them more easily.

He despised such a technique more than anything, yet he entrusted his life to it as it was the most logical and efficient option.

That was Majina.

That was the true master of Hyakki Yakou.

It did not matter if his opponent was an amateur, a baby, or the embodiment of the ideal he had longed after for many long years. His overly clever mind would not hesitate to kill them if that was the logical and efficient thing to do. He would not let them speak and he did not need to warm up or test their strength. He would use his greatest power from the very, very beginning to exterminate his target.

It was not that this was the only thing he could do.

Nor was he looking down on his opponent and holding back.

He had simply made the optimal choice for killing Jinnai Shinobu out of the billions or trillions of deadly techniques available to him.

And that was why his target was killed instantly.

There was no room for argument. Hyakki Yakou did not allow for that sort of naiveté. That single attack tore a hole the size of a volleyball, taking Jinnai Shinobu's heart and one of his lungs with it.

So…

And yet…

Jinnai Shinobu seemed to ignore his death as he ran forward like a bullet.

"What?"

It was not that Majina had taken Jinnai Shinobu lightly. In fact, the man was truly unable to feel such an emotion. He would use his greatest strength to exterminate any opponent. He would logically and efficiently end their life with 100% certainty. That was why he bore the name Majina and that was why he had ruled at the top of Hyakki Yakou.

Nothing had gone wrong as far as ending the boy's life was concerned.

The problem had to do with what happened *after* ending the boy's life.

If some change had slowly occurred only once some time passed after the boy's death, Majina would not have been caught off guard, but this was different.

"Don't…tell me…"

"Majina!! Get ready!! He's coming!!"

"*Don't tell me you had yourself bitten to turn yourself into a zombie!*"

Now it was Jinnai Shinobu's turn.

The zombie's mouth assaulted Majina's shoulder before the man could recover.

Part 11

I knew I would be killed, so I had to think about what was the best *way* to be killed.

When it came to that, the answer was obvious.

To be blunt, it was probably the worst possible option. I started to understand the final moment between Nagisa and the St. Bernard.

But not how Nagisa felt as she sent the St. Bernard to his grave.

I understood how the St. Bernard felt being killed at the hands of the one it cared for most.

“It was one hell of a kiss, Majina!!”

An unpleasant sensation reached my jaw. The smell of rusted metal filled my mouth and I heard a fibrous tearing sound as I felt something soft being ripped from Majina’s shoulder. The intense urge to vomit rose from the depths of my gut. Instead of fighting it, I turned to the side and spat the substance in my mouth to the ground.

“But after being bit by a zombie…no, after receiving a fatal injury or dying, there had to be a few minutes of ‘turning into’ a zombie. During that time, my physical abilities would be improved yet I keep my own thoughts. Yes, it was the same with Nakisuna. When your hair is dyed, it’s hard to tell the hair is losing color. And during that time, even a mere high school boy can outdo you!! I just had to accept being killed!!”

“You let…the Zashiki Warashi bite you…?”

“*If the alternative’s being killed by you, of course I’d choose being killed by her.*”

That was the limit.

A black tornado burst out from Majina. It was nearly an explosion and my zombie strength no longer mattered. I was knocked backwards, blown through the air, and slammed into the hard bedrock with a large hole in my chest.

I slowly slid down, like a piece of raw meat thrown against the wall.

There was nothing more I could do.

I heard an unpleasant sound flowing from the hole in my chest. Even as a zombie, I had no strength left and my mind was growing hazy. I looked down and saw red and purple stains on my hands. My thoughts were breaking down.

However, I had managed to accomplish something.

Still collapsed by the wall, I looked over.

“Gh…gh.”

Majina had a large chunk of flesh missing from his right shoulder to his neck. His collarbone was broken, his neck’s artery was torn, and a frightening amount of fresh blood was spurting out.

“Stop the Kasha Package, Majina.”

I somehow managed to provide a final notification despite my inarticulate tongue.

“You tried to fill Japan with ‘rational zombies’, but you didn’t want to become one yourself, did you? And if you die at this early stage, you’ll be one of the ‘irrational zombies’. You won’t be able to continue with your plans, whatever those might be.”

He could not have had much time with that veritable fountain of blood coming from him.

At most, he would have lasted a few minutes.

His long hair was already growing pale.

“…Heh.”

But he laughed.

And as he laughed, the darkness took form. The black tornado wriggled like a living creature and took aim at me like a great cobra with head raised.

“Hey, Jinnai Shinobu-kun. Did you really think my goal was myself?”

“…?”

“Did you never think I might have something I prioritize above myself, just as you wished to restore that Zashiki Warashi even at the cost of your own life? We do both have a Zashiki Warashi, after all.”

“You…don’t mean…”

Before I could finish…no, before I could even begin, the pitch black serpent prepared to swallow me head-first.

But before it could, a mass of steel weighing more than ten tons dropped down directly above Majina.

The massive and all-purpose darkness changed directions. It easily deflected the great weight threatening to crush Majina.

The darkness instead crushed what turned out to be a yellow-painted bulldozer.

But Majina was more focused on the bulldozer itself than the fact it had attacked him.

“How could this happen…? So that’s it!”

“That’s right. We both have something we can’t compromise on. I will return that Zashiki Warashi to normal whatever it takes. I’ll do anything for that Good-for-Nothing Youkai I know so well, that’s been my Nee-chan for as long as I can remember, and that I’ve fallen in love with! If you had ended the Kasha Package, I wouldn’t have needed to go this far!!”

I smiled.

I smiled?

Was I really smiling?

“The Kasha was sealed at the bottom of the coffin by the Sword of Protection placed directly above. And what else could stand in for a blade with Mikuchi-sama!? *It would have to be the excavation equipment used to expand the cave!!*”

Of course I wouldn’t approach him all on my own without a good reason.

We had split up into two groups from the beginning.

One held Majina’s group in place to buy some time while the other moved the ten ton Sword of Protection to damage the Kasha Package.

If the Zashiki Warashi remained a zombie after a set amount of time, I had instructed the group above to attack this area down below since my negotiations had clearly failed.

This was basically a giant boiler and the Sword of Protection was the safety valve meant to manage the power of the steam. If we forcibly moved it, changed its position, and sent it down to the bottom of the abyss, wouldn’t they lose control of the internal pressure, causing an explosion?

“You mean…you sacrificed your own life to become an undignified zombie, and yet…even after that, you chose the path of an expendable tool!?”

“I had no other choice. It was the only part I could play. Even as a zombie, I can’t knock a bulldozer or power shovel down here.”

That was why I left that job to a Shikigami like the Deadly Dragon Princess and the RC-mode zombie Zashiki Warashi being guided by the Sunekosuri.

And instead…

“I had them give me the honors of getting an attack in on the guy who hurt the girl I’ve fallen for! Why would I complain about that!?”

Meanwhile, more and more pieces of heavy equipment were thrown down. They were not accurately targeting Majina or the Ver. 40. In fact, it probably would have been easier for him to intercept them if they were.

But something else frightened him much more.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

He roared.

The black serpent that was Ohatsu split apart into seemingly infinite numbers and shot down the falling machinery, but he had to know that action was essentially meaningless. We were only tearing off the ultra high power boiler's safety valves and throwing them away. Whether he shot them down or not, the damage to the Kasha Package was already done by the time they were torn off.

And to clinch it, a tunnel boring machine with heavy machinery arms slipped through the gaps in the nearly infinite black snakes and fell into the lava-covered depths of hell.

The wind blew in a different way from before.

"The Sword of Protection isn't meant to close the coffin like a lid. It's supposed to sit next to the dead to drive away the Kasha."

The bottom of Mikuchi-sama was the crucible of death where countless dead had been thrown to ferment over centuries.

The modern Sword of Protection known as excavation machinery stabbed down right next to it.

"The area overhead is wide open and the Sword of Protection has been stabbed into the depths of the earth. There's no way your Kasha will stay put now!!"

I saw a flash of light.

It appeared in the twenty meter wide hole at the bottom of Mikuchi-sama, but it was not an explosion of orange lava.

This went well beyond that.

The pure white light covered everything. Something forced down there had been freed. It was powerful, like a bowstring being released after being drawn beyond its limit.

I finally learned what the Kasha was.

It was said to be a cat Youkai enveloped in flames or the chariot that dragged criminals' souls to hell.

But I was now certain its original form had not been on the side of evil. It had not even been a Youkai.

It was the judge of human souls.

It was in fact close to being a god that crushed people's sins.

As soon as the great light pierced the heavens like a beam weapon, the destruction arrived. It felt something like an intense gust of wind. The Kasha used wind to blow open the lid of the coffin. The bedrock crumbled, the shacks along the side of Mikuchi-sama crumbled, and even the ground below my feet grew unsteady. Just as I felt a shaking, my footing crumbled away like a landslide and it all moved toward the boiling orange volcanic crater.

"…!?"

I grabbed Majina's arm as he was nearly thrown in first.

Fresh red blood flowed back out of my mouth.

We were both dyed purple.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Releasing the Kasha destroyed the Package. The zombie outbreak is over, but there's still more I want to ask you."

"Even if the zombies become human once more, that hole in your chest will not be healed. You too will simply remember that you should be dead."

"Then at least let me die satisfied."

Majina smiled as he dangled down by one arm.

"What do you want to know?"

"Why did you do all this? Why did you develop the Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi, overthrow Hyakki Yakou, and try to strengthen Japan's population with this zombie outbreak? The Sunekosuri said you were afraid of something. I can only assume you're looking to something you can't defeat without forcing everyone to work together. This was all meant to fight whatever it is, but what is it!?"

"It is not an enjoyable story."

"Tell me. This is the end for us both anyway."

"You have already seen this greatest evil that will lead to the end of the world."

…?

I didn't know what he meant, so he continued.

"Listen, Shinobu-kun. There are many different kinds of Zashiki Warashi. Based on their origin, there are those that come from the children killed during famines and there are those that are Kappa or Badger Youkai that took on human form to live in people's houses. The most important point when it comes to that is the color of their clothing."

"What…?"

"Normally, a Zashiki Warashi will prefer to wear a white kimono. That is a standard Zashiki Warashi that brings prosperity to its family. But that is not the only legend concerning them. There are also more disconcerting stories about them predicting a fire or about the entire family dying of food poisoning just as they leave the house."

A normal Zashiki Warashi would wear a white kimono.

But wait.

The Zashiki Warashi I knew didn't. It partially had to do with my grandma using her as a dress-up doll, but there was one color she always preferred!

"Yes, the red kimono. …The Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi is an ill omen. When it leaves the family or predicts that family's destruction, it always wears red."

And…

"That Zashiki Warashi is not just any Zashiki Warashi. She is the Ver. 39. She once had her power thoroughly increased using insane ideas implemented with definite techniques, so she can go beyond manipulating the world's destiny and actually create that destiny out of nothing. So what if she was 'red'? How far would the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi's power reach? She would not bring about the downfall of a single family. There is a chance her influence would surpass the framework of Japan and bring about the downfall of all mankind."

"You're kidding…"

I felt dizzy, but not because my death was approaching.

"How am I supposed to believe that!?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"When she…when that Good-for-Nothing Youkai used her Ver. 39 in that past incident, it was only ten years ago. She's been living in that house for over a century, so the world should've been destroyed far sooner!"

"That just shows how prosperous the Jinnai Brewery was. It was enough to force back the destructive power of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi. You can be proud of that, but it will not last forever. The end is inevitable."

Majina smiled with his purple-dyed face.

"I have the Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi. Why do you think we didn't use that power to put you in checkmate? Because we needed the full power of the Ver. 40 to oppose the ruinous destiny brought by the Ver. 39. If she had used up the Ver. 39 to stop the zombie outbreak, Mei's Ver. 40 could have contained it. But I never expected her to become a zombie herself and lose her rational mind. This was not malice on Yukari's part. We should view it as just how cruel the Ver. 39's ruinous destiny is."

I had assumed Majina's group had started down this strange path because my changes to the past had allowed them to escape their assassination.

"In theory, we should have won, but it didn't work. This power is great enough to overturn reason and drive back logic. While the Ver. 39 is unstable, that very instability allows it, for brief moments, to surpass the power of the fully stabilized Ver. 40. That is why we could not fully suppress the ruin she brings. That is why we lost."

But that wasn't all that happened.

I had resolved that past incident so the Ver. 39, that Good-for-Nothing Youkai, didn't have to lose her power. That meant the power of the Ver. 39 remained. If her bodily structure had been destroyed and she could no longer use her power as a Zashiki Warashi, the world might have stabilized.

Majina had quickly realized that fact, so he had hidden for a decade, remade his beloved Mei into the Ver. 40, and done whatever it took to resist the ruin approaching the world.

It had all been to face that one threat.

It had all been to protect both humans and Youkai from the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.

“You won and we lost. That may be due to our failure to suppress the Ver. 39’s ruinous power, but the result is the same. So accept this. Accept that you have released the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi. Accept the true ruin that will bring.”

“I’m going to die here and this is the truth I find at the very, very end!?”

“That is why I will play one last piece of mischief.”

A small light appeared near Majina’s chest.

Was it was some kind of paranormal power? Since it was intentional, perhaps it was best called a paranormal technique.

“Our original destiny was to die and this incident was the result of us fooling history for ten years. To put it another way, correcting history to its proper form will erase the tragedy we created. It isn’t actually that simple, but my technique can forcibly twist it in that direction. Of course, it will be a joint effort borrowing my wife’s power.”

“Majina…?”

“You returned yourself to human with your own power and your human wounds will be healed by the historical corrections brought by my disappearance. This way you can survive to see the world of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.”

“Wait. But then what happens to all of you!?”

“Ohatsu-san and my wife Mei are both Youkai. They were always paranormal beings, so they have some resistance to interference from history and destiny. Shikimi-san is probably 50/50, but she was always something of a living legend and it’s worth seeing if she can escape her destiny to die. The most unnatural one here is me, a ‘mere human’ who has continued to live in defiance of destiny. So once the distortion of history has concentrated at that weakest point, I will intentionally correct that distortion. That will leave me as the only sacrifice. No one else will be affected."

"That's not what I'm talking about!!"

"I feel bad making a comparison here, but not even Mishima-kun from the NPA stands a chance. Nor does Hafuri. Neither of them can solve this. You are the only one. I am certain that only you can stop the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi that holds the Ver. 39. Protect the world using that power that overcame even me, my shining hero."

The black vortex took the shape of a small canine Youkai.

It was the Sunekosuri named Ohatsu.

"You knew this would happen from the beginning, didn't you?" she asked.

"I am not that farsighted. I truly did not predict what Shinobu-kun was after and it was entirely my own error that we failed to suppress the Ver. 39. Then again, I won't deny that I set things up so some hope would remain no matter who won."

Even now, the Hyakki Yakou Special-Made Ver. 40 Zashiki Warashi said nothing.

Perhaps she had been altered to the point that she couldn't.

She had a thin veil covering half her face and a head-mounted display around her neck. Most importantly of all, she wore the white kimono, a symbol of normality that she could not escape.

Majina glanced over at his partner who could not and was not allowed to change her expression.

"True to my name, I will cast a curse on you."

"What are you-…?"

"Take care of my wife and daughter. I won't ask that you return them to a proper path in life. I only ask that you do enough to keep them smiling in the narrow field over which Hyakki Yakou rules. I know I am being selfish, but I will soon be crushed between the gears of history in order to protect your dream of walking alongside the Ver. 39. I can at least wish that you will get along with any Youkai, can't I?"

I felt something run down my spine.

I couldn't explain what exactly it was, but something invisible seemed to seep out from Majina's smile. It was entirely different from the zombie purple.

It may have been what they call the shadow of death.

"Screw that…"

I didn't care how irrational my argument was. Anything was fine.

No matter what, I had to sweep aside that pallor spreading across Majina's face!

"After everything you've done, you're just going to disappear at your own convenience!? That's just quitting while you're ahead! Don't you try to look cool by dying!! Live on and make up for what you've done!! I'm not going to allow this! I'm going to drag you to somewhere you can be judged! No matter what!!"

I finally understood this man named Majina, at least a little bit.

He had not swapped an eye with Mei for some disturbing benefit or ideology. A Zashiki Warashi would remain with or leave their family depending on that family's prosperity or decline. He had wanted some kind of eternal bond and he had wanted to be a normal family, so like exchanging rings, they had exchanged a part of their bodies.

He was the same as me.

He was the end result of a man who had been willing to make an enemy of the world to grasp a life of happiness with the Zashiki Warashi he had fallen for.

He was a living corpse that had been left behind by history.

And even though I finally understood him…

"Oh, and one other thing. Please pass a message on to that girl. Tell her I'm sorry I never had a chance to celebrate her birthday. But assure her that Mei and I never forgot her face even once. Tell her she was our greatest treasure."

"Majinaaaaaaa!!!!!"

“Such a beautiful light.”

At first, I had no idea what he was talking about.

But…

“I see. So the Kasha was a chariot that carries the souls of criminals to hell.”

The bright light that had been released to the surface once more descended into the great pit. It bared its fangs in its proper role. That beam of light swallowed up everything, tore Majina’s hand from my own, and carried that man, who had committed great crimes out of love for his family, into the lava-filled depths of the earth.

Once the light vanished, I was a human rather than a zombie.

No trace remained of the hole in my chest and I was among the living rather than the dead.

My archenemy had been eliminated.

History had been corrected and the zombie outbreak was over, so it was the ultimate happy ending.

And yet I still felt like an invisible hole remained somewhere in my chest.

Epilogue

Wearing her Yozakura suit, Hishigami Mai climbed out of Mikuchi-sama and onto the dog square at the peak. Several large transport helicopters had landed on the late night snowy mountain.

One of them contained a girl of about ten in mourning clothes and surrounded by bodyguards.

“Is it over?” asked Hafuri.

“I defeated Hishigami Shikimi myself, but I wasn’t the one to end it.”

Mai spat out her answer and asked a question of her own.

“How are things ‘outside’?”

“As previously reported, the zombie outbreak ended at exactly the same moment in every affected city around the country. There was no major damage and all the zombies and people killed by the zombies have recovered.”

“But since we have this common understanding, I’m guessing we all still have our memories of the zombie outbreak.”

“Most of the normal people only have vague memories of the zombie outbreak beginning and coming to an end, so I expect some social unrest to continue for the time being. And the truth of this would be difficult to make public. We can’t have Hyakki Yakou’s techniques spreading like some kind of scam.”

“So does this mean a Mr. Tanaka who became a zombie will retain his memories of being killed by a Mr. Yamada who was still human? Even if there’s no law to cover this, it’s probably going to strain some relationships.”

“I’m more worried about large-scale con artist groups or cults showing up to take advantage of the social unrest. If that happens…”

“Sure thing. If you’ll pay me extra, I’m more than willing to run out and do some damage control.”

A short distance from Hishigami Mai and Hafuri, the Sunekosuri named Ohatsu looked around on top of the pure white snow.

The tension of the hopeless zombie outbreak had entirely relaxed and a Hyakki Yakou without Majina filled the scene around her.

That was when she realized it was truly over.

An era had come to an end.

“Ohatsu!!”

Another small canine Youkai ran over, but Ohatsu resolutely rejected him.

“Do you really think I would beg for my life?”

“…”

“I am from the true Hyakki Yakou! I am a comrade of the darkness that built an entire era with Majina!! I will take whatever punishment our failure has earned me. Take me wherever you wish and chop off my head with delight!! The victors may build a new era atop my corpse!!”

She did not try to ingratiate herself to him.

She would proudly accept her punishment with no attempt to negotiate.

“Uuhh…”

But when the Sunekosuri was faced with that will of steel…

“Uuhhhhhhhhh!! Uuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!”

He squeezed his eyes shut and yet still could not prevent the clear tears from spilling out.

Ohatsu gave an exasperated sigh.

“Is that pathetic reaction all you can manage when your spouse is prepared to accept her death?”

“I don’t care. I don’t care about that!!”

He shook his head and drowned her out.

“It’s true I can’t forgive what you did. You spat on Hafuri-sama, dragged countless innocent people into this, and plotted to overthrow the country. Destroying you was the obvious answer and we should probably be celebrating this conclusion.”

But the Sunekosuri turned all of that around.

“But I’m just so glad you’re alive!! That’s all I care about!!”

Ohatsu did not say anything more.

She briefly narrowed her eyes. After being separated for so long, the two Youkai moved in close just once.

“If only you could be that honest, young lady,” said Hishigami Mai.

“About what?” asked Hafuri with a frown.

“Ohatsu began working with Majina because she felt she needed a connection to the leader of Hyakki Yakou if she was to create a system to prevent humans from hunting down harmless and powerless Youkai. In other words, it was to protect her husband and son.”

“Hm? What does that have to do with me?”

“One question: what was Majina and Mei’s goal?”

“As reported, to prevent a worldwide disaster brought about by the Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi…no, the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.”

“That was the means, not the goal.” Mai gave a simple rejection. “The Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi was certainly a major problem, but they had another fear. A Zashiki Warashi is an unstable Youkai with an easily broken balance between fortune and disaster. And Majina and Mei knew of someone much more sensitive and delicate than a pure Zashiki Warashi.”

“You don’t mean…”

“They knew of a half-human, half-Zashiki Warashi. In other words, you. Your existence is unprecedented, so no one knew if you would bring great fortune or great disaster. Would you become a Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi or would you become something even worse? That was a distinct possibility and there was only one way to fight against it: reveal every last detail of the Zashiki Warashi species, even if it meant altering his wife's body and even if it meant digging up the techniques from Hyakki Yakou's prime that they so despised. That was the only thing they could do in the hopes that they could remake you into something harmless instead of taking your life if their fears were realized."

"…"

"The Hyakki Yakou that Majina wanted was apparently an organization in which humans and Youkai could coexist. In that way, even the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi was a useful specimen and creating a happy life for a half-human, half-Youkai like you would be the ultimate judgement of their organization and a lesson to the world. So as they divulged the secrets of the white and red Zashiki Warashi, they were hoping they could approach the workings of something as truly irregular as a half-human version."

Hafuri fell silent for a moment, but she finally shook her head.

"That is all speculation. They were nothing more than a cruel system. What proof do you have that personal feelings like that were lurking below the surface?"

"Mei."

"?"

"Why do you think he gave his wife such a meaningful name? That name is a sign of the resolve to 'wander' between the white and the red Zashiki Warashi. And all so that the three of you could live as a happy family in the end. His wife was the journey of hardship, so her name means 'wander'. And you were the goal, so your name means 'celebration'."

This time, the lonely girl named Hafuri fell truly silent.

However, that did not last long either.

But not because she had opened her mouth. It was because new footsteps approached on the snow.

"Jinnai Shinobu…"

The Zashiki Warashi in a red yukata was with him.

She was the Hyakki Yakou Prototype Ver. 39 Zashiki Warashi…no, the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi.

“You didn’t think about trying to escape us?”

“I thought about it countless times, but I couldn’t imagine how I wouldn’t just get caught in the end.”

He gave a weary sigh before continuing.

His face twisted as he looked to Hafuri…no, to the girl in mourning clothes.

“Plus, Majina asked me to do something at the very end. He asked me to look after his wife and daughter. I couldn’t just turn my back on that.”

“…”

He had said “at the very end”.

That man had been Hafuri’s greatest enemy and her father. Even without a detailed explanation, the ten year old girl concluded that she would never see him again.

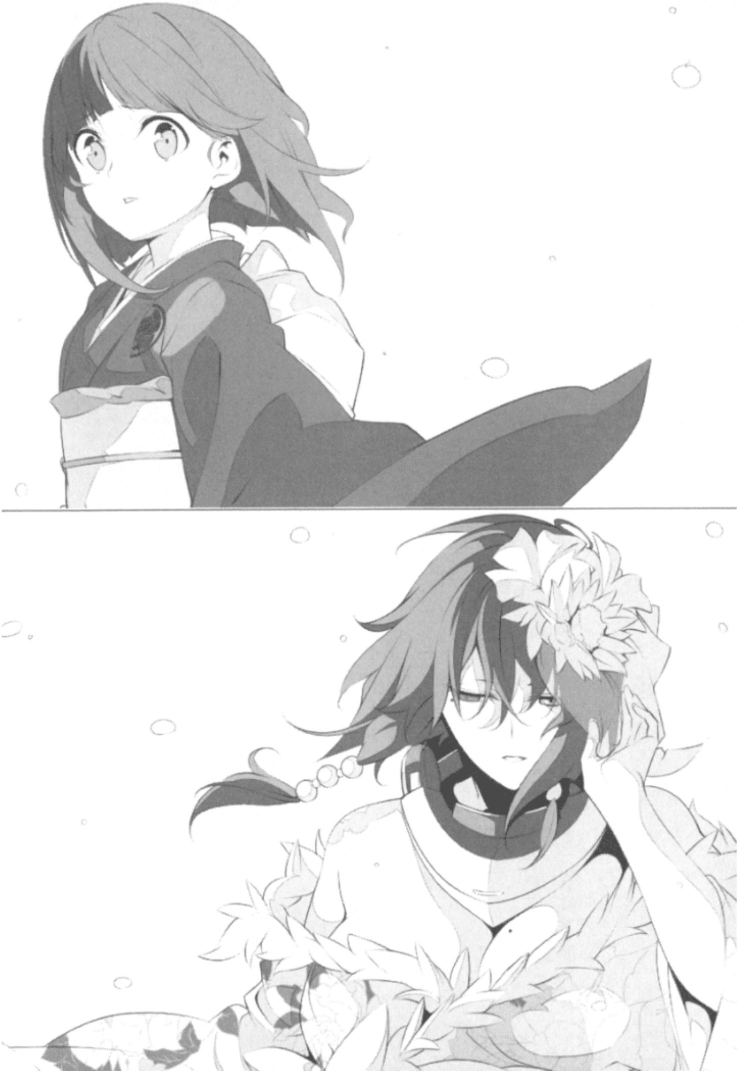
The blond high school boy continued while bowing his head.

“…Sorry.”

“There is nothing for you to apologize for. Ending the nationwide zombie outbreak and returning alive is more than enough.”

“Right, right,” casually cut in Hishigami Mai. “And it isn’t like Jinnai Shinobu didn’t manage anything. We may not have made it in time for Majina, but Hafuri’s mother just barely made it.”

“?”



“A Zashiki Warashi sticks with its family. With Majina gone, there was a chance the Ver. 40 would just vanish. …But it didn’t happen that way. Youkai seem to naturally take a liking to Jinnai Shinobu and that trait must have kept her from wandering off. That’s what gave us the chance we needed to reconnect her to you.”

Hafuri looked back in the direction Mai pointed with her thumb.

Standing in the pure white snow was an even purer white Youkai. She was the ideal form of the Zashiki Warashi. She would simply protect whoever was set as her master. The sexy Youkai could do nothing more than that, but this still meant the girl was no longer alone.

"…"

Their gazes met.

Hishigami Mai placed a hand on Jinnai Shinobu's shoulder and they left along with the Ver. 39.

They left the mother and daughter alone.

Just before they left, Mai had a thought

(We never did find Hishigami Shikimi.)

The current Hyakki Yakou was still searching through Mikuchi-sama and Bozen City, but Mai doubted they would find her.

That woman was the founder of the Hishigami line.

She specialized in destruction and she was feared more than anyone, but she had clung to this world for a thousand years in the simple desire to just once be useful to someone and receive their thanks.

Mai could only assume the woman would continue travelling from darkness to darkness as she always had.

The suspect was dead.

Serial murders based in old traditions and modeled after ceremonial sacrifice had occurred at the dog square on the peak. Traces had been found of the missing people having been restrained and imprisoned. Further investigation was required.

Just as Uchimaku Hayabusa finished using his laptop to write up and send a report, a young man slowly approached from the distance.

Hayabusa closed the laptop and stood up.

"Sorry about asking to meet you so late."

"It's fine. I would have been bored stuck in the guest room. Plus I doubt they will send out any more planes in this snow. If you would like, I can make a call and have a room opened for you in a Hishigami-owned hotel. I will be doing the same for myself, so I would only be doing it for you while I was at it."

"No, I'll just sleep here and wait for morning. I'm used to saving money like that."

"I see."

The man in Japanese clothing laughed and narrowed his eyes.

His named was Hishigami Kyou.

He was one of the primary managers of the Hishigami Group, Japan's greatest general trading company. He was also a member of the Hishigami Men and was third in line to the main Hishigami family.

He was not someone one would expect to see in a local airport lobby so late at night when flight after flight was canceled. Even if he had been waiting in the luxurious guest room that normal people could not use and usually did not even know existed. If this man wished for it, he could have every last airport employee working like crazy to clear the entire runway of snow and send out a charter plane with the Hishigami crest on the tail.

"I heard what you said, so I honestly just wanted to speak with you."

"I am honored."

"No need to be so formal. You are a government worker, so you put food on the table using the taxes removed from normal economic activity. You do not rely on the economic world, right? Paying taxes is a duty, not a right." Kyou spoke simply. "You are working with… yes, I believe it was Enbi. The Hishigami Woman that specializes in other humans. If her talents were to blossom, she could erase a full fourth of the earth's population. There are some that wish to let that potential blossom in order to resolve global warming or the energy crisis, but you have done an excellent job of restraining her. Perhaps I should avoid saying this as a member of the main Hishigami family, but I respect you as an individual."

"…"

"You did not make an appointment because you happened to be in the area, right? What is it you wanted to discuss with a man you have never met? If it is something reasonable, I will answer in kind.”

“Okay, then.”

Uchimaku Hayabusa shrugged his shoulders just once and slowly inhaled.

“Hishigami Kyou-san. This might not be something a police officer should say.”

“What is it? Are you reaching your limit as far as handling Enbi is concerned? If so, I can provide some reasonable assistance in naturally removing her from you.”

“No, it isn’t that.” The detective sounded like he was raising the white flag. “I want to punch you right in the face. That’s what this is about, you son of a bitch.”

Hishigami Kyou looked taken aback.

A moment later, a solid sound rang out and the man in Japanese clothing was thrown to the floor. Uchimaku Hayabusa grimaced as he looked down at the man. It almost looked like his own glass skeleton had shattered from the blow’s reactionary force.

He had just done something that rejected his entire lifestyle as a policeman.

He understood that, but he continued onward.

“Why?”

“Why what?”

“You have so much! So very much!! You receive so much fortune that it’s overflowing!! So why don’t you give any of that to Enbi and the others!?”

“Do you know nothing of the Hishigami-…”

“Oh, I know,” cut in Hayabusa. “I know all about your rules concerning the Hishigami Men and Hishigami Women! And I know there’s some truth to it even if there’s no real proof. Enbi – and Mai and Shikimi too – live in a world that brings tragedy, not comedy.”

“…”

"It's true they're monsters."

Uchimaku Hayabusa clenched his teeth and forced out his voice.

"But you're the ones that made them into monsters!! If you had reached out to them even a little and had shown them at least the kindness of holding and comforting a newborn baby, they wouldn't have turned out like that!! Can the Hishigami Men really look down on the Hishigami Women? You unilaterally harm them, yet they continue forward in that frightening darkness! Is rejecting someone just because they're a little creepy your idea of 'reasonable'!?"

That was all he managed to say.

Several dull sounds filled the lobby.

However, they were not the sounds of Uchimaku Hayabusa's fists raining down on Hishigami Kyou.

Instead, they were the sounds of dull impacts reaching the detective's cardigan-wearing torso.

The great sounds were almost explosive in and of themselves.

"Gh…"

Uchimaku Hayabusa did not know what had happened.

It was not from his stomach and not from his lungs either, but he felt some unknown substance flowing backwards through his body.

"Bh…"

The impacts caused several organs to convulse and wriggle and all strength left his legs and waist. He collapsed to the floor. As Hishigami Kyou slowly stood back up, several young woman wearing special suits that covered all of their joints surrounded him.

Those soldiers seemed to have appeared out of thin air and their fists had struck him like curving laser beams. The lines of light were colored red, blue, and yellow.

They were dressed in the same kunoichi-esque outfit as Hishigami Mai.

The protectors on their right arms bore the Hishigami crest and what may have been their individual name.

“Wha-…? Are they…Hishigami…Women…?”

“Of course not. I would never make such an unreasonable choice.”

Hishigami Kyou brought a hand up to check on his swelling cheek, but his expression remained entirely calm.

“However, they have had a portion of those traits artificially implanted in them. They are not Hishigami Women, but they can do the same things. The level of their abilities has of course deteriorated somewhat, but they will not leave my control. Their hair and eye color may look strange, but that is probably due to the Youkai medicine they’re using. I’m not entirely sure why their hair grew white on top of that, though. This is the furthest limit of what we can consider ‘reasonable’.”

“…”

Hayabusa tried to say something, but he could not gather his thoughts. He simply raised his unfocused eyes from the floor and Hishigami Kyou calmly asked him a question.

“So what did you want to do with the Hishigami Women?”

The man sounded puzzled.

In that instant, Hayabusa’s thoughts focused in on a single point and he used his clear mind to respond.

“I want them to be happy. No, I want to make them happy…”

He was unsure if his lips or throat would even move, but he used them to squeeze out the words.

“I want to give that girl a normal life…where she doesn’t need to fear anything, doesn’t need to act tough, and doesn’t need to hurt anything. I don’t want her to restrain herself so much. I want her to live happily as she grows more and more. It is my duty to fight all of you who are trying to rob her of that normal life…”

That was the limit.

His consciousness vanished like a thin thread had snapped.

For a while, the man who controlled it all squeezed his eyes shut as if savoring the flavor of some coffee.

"Kyou-sama."

"What is it, Zei?"

"Why did you take the first punch yourself? If you had given us freedom to move a little earlier, you would not have needed to bear that pain."

"Well…"

Hishigami Kyou opened his eyes again and smiled with enjoyment on his lips.

He gave a glance to Zei, Akane, and Ran, the three peerless weapons standing around him.

"It is true we only act in a reasonable fashion. If the world is heading in a cruel direction, we must be dyed in those same colors. That is what the Hishigami Men are. Our hatred of the Hishigami Women is nothing more than a reflection of that tendency of the world."

"…"

"But this is interesting. If a youth like him would support the reasonable side of this country…no, of the world, perhaps even we could live a life of joy and pleasure. He embodies a form of 'reasonable' that grows angry for the likes of Enbi and Mai and who would stand up for the entirety of Hishigami."

The woman named Zei did not protest.

The young man in Japanese clothing slowly sighed while beautiful women surrounded him like faithful dogs.

"Treat him with care. Ensure that he finds a reasonable and pleasant morning when he wakes up."

"Understood. What about the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department?"

"Of course we aren't going to contact them. Why would I nip this wonderful form of reasonable in the bud for no good reason? And settling incidents like these out of court is still a perfectly reasonable choice."

"Then that is how we will handle this."

"I do wonder if he has realized that it is my duty to make a certain person happy and to fight all those who would get in the way. And if one viewed that conversation through the reasonable lens of normal society, you cannot help but misinterpret it as him asking our family to give him the girl's hand in marriage."

"If I might say so, are you enjoying this because he does not understand the gravity of what he is doing?"

"Ha ha! That is quite a unique opinion for someone with such love for all things reasonable!!"

The train only ran five times a day.

Jinnai Shinobu and the Zashiki Warashi caught the last train of that hopeless schedule and sat in the train seats with their shoulders together.

If Majina had been telling the truth about the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi, then there was no guarantee the two of them would be freed. It was even possible they would have been buried as enemies of society, but that had not happened. Hafuri may have inherited Majina's desire for human and Youkai to coexist and that may have slowly changed the organization of Hyakki Yakou.

"I can't believe this…"

"Believe what?"

"That you remember everything that happened when you were a zombie. Sure, it was an extreme situation, but I said a little too much and now I kind of want to die…"

"Yes, yes. I do recall you throwing someone in a cage, dragging her around outside like a part of a freak show, having her eat a handkerchief and half-eaten ham, remote controlling her with a cellphone and smartphone, and even sending her tumbling down some stairs while still in the cage. Right, Shinobu?"

"Hold it right there, Zashiki Warashi! This is about train etiquette! You can't perform a pile driver inside a shaking train car!!"

Shinobu put up a desperate resistance when he nearly fell victim to a wrestling technique, but the Zashiki Warashi was not being serious. She only pouted her lips and spoke as they returned to their seats.

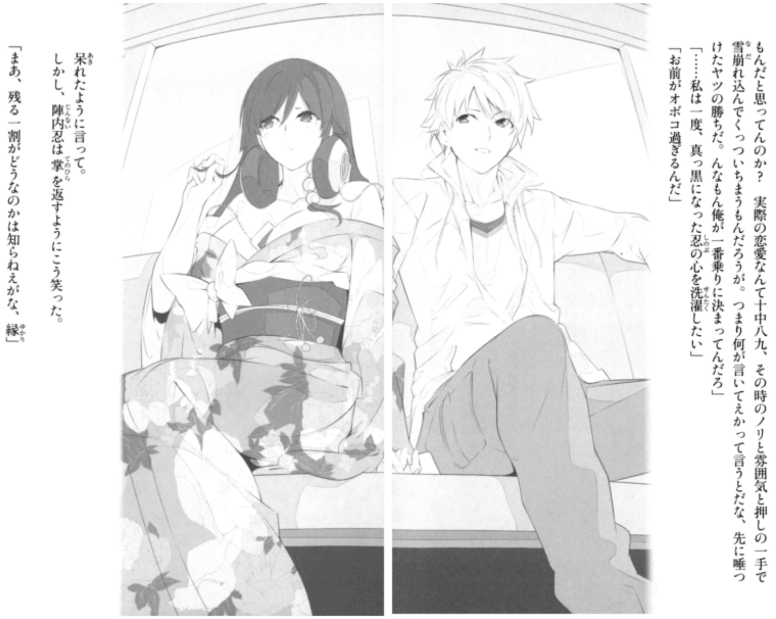
“But, Shinobu. Now that I think about it, your logic doesn’t really hold up.”

“Hm?”

“It may be true that the whole ‘Onee-chan’ thing was an illusion of what I wanted to be. It may be true I’m really just a normal girl and an immature soul that stands on equal footing with you.”

As she spoke, she gently took the boy’s hand.

“But that just means I can fall in love like a normal girl. I don’t think it means that love is limited to you.”



もんだと思ってんのか？　実際の恋愛なんて十中八九、その時のノリと雰囲気と押しの一手で雪崩れ込んでくっついちまうもんだろうが。つまり何が言いてえかって言うとだな、先に唾つけたヤツの勝ちだ。んなもん俺が一番乗りに決まってんだろ」

「……私は一度、真っ黒になった忍の心を洗濯したい」

「お前がオボコ過ぎるんだ」

呆れたように言って。

しかし、陣内忍は掌を返すようにこう笑った。

「まあ、残る一割がどうなのかは知らねえがな、縁」

“Don’t be silly. Do you think all the world’s romance is reliant on some red string or on destiny? Nine times out of ten, actual love is the result of the mood or the atmosphere giving one last push in the right direction. In other words, say what you like, but whoever calls dibs first is the winner. And who could possibly get there before me?”

“Your heart really has grown pitch black. I feel like I need to wash it clean.”

“You’re just too pure.”

Jinnai Shinobu sounded exasperated, but he still squeezed her hand back and smiled.

“But don’t ask about the tenth time out of ten, Yukari.”

If the story of the Bloodstained Zashiki Warashi was true, the world would end before long.

A true disaster would arrive that made the battle with the Aoandon’s group and Majina’s zombie outbreak look like nothing. A hopeless future was coming to burn the world to the ground.

An inevitable fight awaited these two after that.

But for the time being, they could remain happy lovers.

Afterword

That was Volume 8.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Volume 8. Volume 8, huh? This series has gotten pretty long, hasn't it? But why is it that I feel like I've done about twice that much work? While that sinks in, I'll announce this volume's theme. It was love!! The most obvious examples were related to Shinobu, but I mixed in some other romances outside of that.

Romance is not necessarily a pretty and happy thing. In one chapter, it was a motive for murder. In another chapter, it forced a choice between selecting one girl and abandoning the other. I decided to put in as much love as I could, both the pure and the impure.

I set up a large framework to reconfirm Shinobu's feelings for the Zashiki Warashi, but I omitted any major explanation on her feelings for him because I felt that went without saying at this stage. Unlike the heroines in my other series, I didn't have to include the "meeting" and "growing" stages of their relationship, so it's a bit of an exception even in my novels. The story began in checkmate, so it was over the instant they realized their feelings for each other.

And even though I made bittersweet love as the theme, for some reason the entire story was about a zombie hell. That was a very Intellectual Village style of twist.

Personally, I think the true heart of a zombie story can be found in two points:

"Where did the zombies come from?"

"How can they overcome the zombie outbreak?"

And during that process, it might be important to build up some excitement as you wonder what you would do and where you would go in that situation. Unlike a normal action movie, you place yourself in the same hopeless situation as the protagonist and feel like you can move around relatively freely in that world. What did all of you think?

And that’s why I tried a zombie story since Intellectual Village allowed for it. I hope you enjoyed it.

About Chapter 1.

This chapter was used to explain the basic rules of this world’s zombie outbreak. Would you move on foot for some freedom despite the danger or would you use the solid dump truck that could get stopped and leave you trapped? Which means of transportation would you choose?

I set the zombies’ strength at the level of a grizzly bear. I thought comparing it to a real animal would make it easier to understand, but I also feared it would make the monsters less frightening. However, I decided it would still work since having ten or a hundred grizzly-level monsters charging at you would be enough of a nightmare. And Nagisa is a quite a monster herself to fight against those grizzlies with just a shovel.

The villain’s motive was powerful love.

I discussed how the zombies tell friend from foe and how they pursue their prey so accurately and I took advantage of those facts.

About Chapter 2.

I had some time pass to set the chapter in Bozen City after the zombie outbreak had spread some. I tried to make a story that made you question if the zombies even existed and if humans were maybe the real threat.

I made the twisted version of Nagisa as a character centered on an extremely simplified version of human relationships. While Shinobu is constantly pursued as her yandere target, Hayabusa and Enbi were placed in a different classification and could more easily see who she was.

If you reread Chapter 2 after reading Chapter 4’s parting with Shinobu, you might get a different impression now that you know why Nagisa is doing what she does.

Also, Nagisa reveals that the zombies are chewing anything that draws their attention rather than eating the living.

By the way, the original incident with the St. Bernard was not the only reason that Nagisa broke. It was also because she learned that Shinobu's feelings were shifting to the Zashiki Warashi (even if he wasn't aware of it) back in middle school. He can't exactly complain if she stabs him, can he?

About Chapter 3.

I decided a superhuman like Mai wouldn't be that interesting fighting a bunch of zombies, so I had her take a parachute shortcut right to the center and focused on her battle with Hishigami Shikimi, another Hishigami Woman. That changed the setting from the city to the pit and shifted the tone from Western zombie horror to Japanese-style horror (things like bloody rituals).

And since it was a Mai story, I took the dog square, a symbol of hope and escape in Chapter 1, and revealed the horrific tradition behind it to completely turn its value on its head.

The first three chapters all had hopeless endings, but in accordance with the rule that using the Deadly Dragon Princess means she has 100% lost, the most awful defeat awaited her.

About Chapter 4.

This chapter made use of all the rules set up in Chapters 1-3. For example, capturing the zombie Zashiki Warashi in the bear trap, controlling her with the cellphone and smartphone, and switching between using her with the zombies or Shinobu with the humans. I think I did a good job of giving off the sense I mentioned of "I'd do this if it was me!", but that is for all of you to judge.

It was almost entirely from Shinobu's POV, but I did include Uchimaku Hayabusa, Hishigami Enbi, and Hishigami Mai as zombies for an all-star appearance. Since Shinobu had himself bitten on purpose at the end, all of the main characters except for the Sunekosuri fell prey to the zombies. …In that way, maybe the Sunekosuri has the most amazing survival ability? Maybe he isn't an official member of Hyakki Yakou for nothing.

With the battle against Majina, I felt it would be wrong for a high school boy like Shinobu to fight some long battle, so I had him instantly killed before he could even speak the first word. Attacking before your opponent can say anything is taboo in a battle series, but I went with it since it’s hard to say this series is really a battle series. (I’d have trouble telling you what kind of series it is, though.)

This chapter of course had Shinobu and Yukari risking their lives for their love, but it had the same with Majina and Mei. You might enjoy imagining what love means to each of them and what value those two who lived with a Zashiki Warashi place on it.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. The heart of this volume may have been the before and after of the main characters. This might have been even more trouble than a simple costume change, so I’m thankful they stuck with me.

I also give my thanks to the readers. It was all about love and all about zombies. I fused together those polar opposites, but I feel like the person that moves your heart at the very, very end in those extreme situations might really be what that’s all about. What did you think?

And I will end this here.

The Kasha had a casual appearance in Volume 7 too.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Translator's notes and references

Backward to Volume 7 Forward to Volume 9